

Poster notes: 1898

Introduction:

A child's early years are a critical period of their life; it is this period that lays the foundational blocks of their health, well-being and positive lifestyle behaviours. It is during this formative stage that experiences, interactions and environments play a pivotal role in shaping the child's long-term emotional, physical and cognitive development, and while the concepts of health, well-being and lifestyle are often discussed separately, they are profoundly interconnected and influenced by a combination of a child's circumstances and those of broader social influence and detriments (Ahmed, 2025).

These differing elements are particularly important in terms of early childhood, as children are highly responsive to their surroundings and the care they receive. Thus, early years settings and the practitioners who work within them are in a position to ensure they make a positive, lasting impact (Education Development Trust, 2024).

This poster will explore how the concepts of health, well-being and lifestyle influence a child's early development. It will also delve deeper into the role of early years practitioners and what they can do to promote positive outcomes for children and their families, especially those at a disadvantage. When examining these intertwined aspects, a more precise understanding can be seen of how quality care, support and early intervention can help promote a child's health, well-being and lifestyle.

Health:

The definition of health can be a challenging concept to articulate, as its interpretation varies significantly between individuals and across diverse contexts. However, Sir Michael Marmot (2010) defined health in his 2010 review, titled 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives,' as people are shaped by the conditions in which they are born, grow, live, work and age. This is further supported by the Dahlgren and Whitehead model of health determinants (2021), first introduced in 1991, which has become a widely known framework that outlines the multifaceted influences that affect an individual's health. It explains how our health is built of multiple layers, with our individual factors at the centre and societal conditions on the periphery.

This model is particularly good at providing a holistic view of health determinants and how health is influenced by a complex play of both individual and social aspects. However, it does not account for more contemporary issues that could have a negative impact on health, such as the introduction of digital devices (Jahnel *et al.*, 2022).

However, the model has also been influential in numerous policies that address social determinants of health, helping promote health equity. For instance, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mandates considering the long-term impacts of the multifaceted components of health during the decision-making

process. This Act embodies the principles of the Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) Model by promoting a holistic approach to health.

In terms of early years, health is crucial. It lays the foundations for lifelong physical, emotional and cognitive development. The First 1000 Days Programme (n.d.) is an excellent example of this. It emphasises the need for favourable conditions for babies in the first 1000 days of life, such as safe homes and support for parents, thus helping break generational cycles and making headway for the new generations to thrive. This closely correlates to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the impact of a multilayered environment on children, from their immediate surroundings, such as family and childcare, known as microsystems, to their macrosystems, which are understood to be the broader societal influences, such as cultural norms and policy. Like the First 1000 Days approach, it reflects the importance of healthcare, housing, parental support and community support to best influence the early childhood years, support appropriate development in children and turn, promote resilience and equity (Moore *et al.*, 2017).

However, early years practitioners can also play a pivotal role in ensuring that children's physical, emotional and cognitive developmental needs are met, especially during those first 1000 days. Providing positive daily interactions and embedding encouraging routines can help promote healthy eating, physical activity, proper hygiene and emotional regulation and help support the holistic approach needed for children to have the best start in life (Melhuish *et al.*, 2019; Education Policy Institute, 2020).

Well-being:

Well-being is another multifaceted concept, and in early childhood, it is especially crucial as this period lays the foundations for the child's development and health outcomes. It involves physical and mental health, education, material and emotional security, and relationships (Statham and Chase, 2010). Children with a strong sense of well-being also foster healthy brain development, resilience, and positive social interactions (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012).

One qualitative study conducted between 2015 and 2024 reported that receiving praise, achieving goals, and spending quality time with loved ones were all positive contributing factors to a child's well-being. However, the study also reported that children felt a sense of unhappiness when they received limited peer interactions and felt their voices were ignored (Kellock, 2020).

This aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which suggests that a child's basic physiological needs must be met before moving up the pyramid to self-actualisation. Nevertheless, it reinforces the idea that basic needs start with feelings

of love and belonging, which are essential for a child to thrive (Maslow, 1943; Shonkoff et al., 2012).

However, unlike Maslow's hierarchical model (1943), where it is seen as a more linear progression from physiological needs to self-actualisation, the ABC Model (Roberts, 2010), which stands for Agency, Belonging and Connectedness, recognises that these needs can operate simultaneously and together. For example, in an early years setting, children thrive when they are empowered to make their own choices (agency), feel secure emotionally and accepted (belonging) and are positively connected with their families, culture and communities (connectedness).

The ABC Model aligns closely with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), particularly with Article 12, which states that children have a right to be heard, and Article 29, which states that children have a right to the development of their talents and personalities.

Furthermore, Welsh policy frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 (Welsh Government, 2015) embed these values by promoting inclusiveness (Welsh Government, 2021). These rights and values collectively affirm a child's right to holistic well-being.

However, in her study, *How to Grow Up Happy: An Exploratory Study on the Meaning of Happiness from Children's Voices*, Thoilliez (2011) suggests that not all children come from happy homes. Thus, they do not have holistic well-being. The study aimed to find out what makes a child happy. The findings highlighted that a child's overall happiness was closely linked to their relationships with friends and family. Suggesting that the better these relationships are, the happier a child can be.

These findings by Thoilliez circle back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the ABC model, cementing the suggestion that love, belonging, and connectedness are more than necessary for a truly holistic sense of well-being.

Furthermore, early years practitioners can help support a child's well-being by ensuring they create a nurturing and supportive environment that helps with their emotional regulation and resilience. Additionally, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) places a profound emphasis on the importance of high-quality care in early education settings, helping aid children to foster these skills (NICE, 2023).

However, high-quality care is subjective, and there is not a defined explanation of what this looks like. *Birth to Five Matters* (n.d.) describes high-quality care as a setting that aims to continuously improve with the incorporation of continued professional development.

Lifestyle:

Lifestyle can be defined by a person's pattern of behaviours, which are based on choices made from the options available to them; these options are often influenced by a person's socio-economic circumstances (The National Health Service (NHS) Wales, n.d.; Muwfaq, 2023; World Health Organisation, 2019).

In early childhood, aspects such as physical activity, nutrition, emotional well-being, social interactions, and sleep are also important for a child to live a healthy lifestyle (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). However, a child's lifestyle is not isolated to just these factors but instead can be shaped by a handful of interwoven elements. These include their family income, housing situation, their parents' education quality, and access to healthcare and early education services (OCED, 2025).

According to Estyn (2024), children who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to encounter barriers to healthy appropriate food, safe environments and quality early years education. Consequently, this results in their developmental outcomes and emotional well-being being compromised. A review of parental behaviours' effects on a child's lifestyle (Maia *et al.*, 2025) supports this. The review suggests that their parents' behaviours and routines dramatically influence a child's lifestyle. They concluded clear associations between a child's mental health, sleep, daily behaviours and body mass index (BMI) against areas such as their parents' diet, emotional well-being and sleep.

Although it is poverty that has the most significant impact on children's lifestyles, a report by The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) found that in 2022/2023, 14.3 million people lived in poverty within the United Kingdom (UK), of which 4.3 million were children. This is further supported by The Equality and Human Rights Commissioners' (2024) tracker on "Adequate standards of living: Poverty and Social Security" that shines light on ongoing concerns within the UK, particularly the prevalence of single-parent families relying on food banks. Both the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Equality and Human Rights Commissioners have recommended the UK government implement changes to tackle the issue of persistent child poverty.

In response, the Welsh Government (2024) provided families and individuals facing food poverty with £1.7 million in funding. The funding aimed to provide emergency food aid through local groups, in the hope of addressing immediate food insecurity.

Moreover, children who are not living a healthy lifestyle due to poverty and adverse parental behaviours are often experiencing greater challenges in terms of school readiness (Department for Education, 2022). Therefore, it is vital that early years practitioners support children in developing healthy habits. They can help do this by promoting regular physical activity, by incorporating it into their daily time schedules and by ensuring nutritious meals and snacks are available in their settings, along with modelling positive behaviours themselves (Hesketh *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the offerings of parenting workshops or support groups, along with signposting of relevant services such as social workers and health visitors, can also help empower parents with the knowledge and skills needed to better improve their children's lifestyles, in turn improving their well-being and health (Grindal *et al.*, 2016; Gonzalez-Gomez, 2025).

Conclusion:

To conclude, the content presented within this poster demonstrates just how deeply interconnected a child's life is in those early developmental stages. It is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, familial and societal factors, and the theories, policies and models mentioned help provide a valuable framework for understanding the broader context in which children develop.

By promoting healthy equity, emotional well-being, and healthy lifestyle habits right from the start, practitioners and policymakers can ensure that every child and their family have the best support and start in life.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid

Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Pinterest, n.d.).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (Pinterest, n.d.).

Graph showing the rates of children in absolute poverty from the Institute for Fiscal Studies

Figure 3: Absolute poverty graph (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2023).

Script:

Hello and welcome, my name is Amy Cox, student number 2412700. Thank you for joining me today.

The focus of this presentation is the critical importance of maintaining a healthy, well-balanced diet during early childhood. This topic is becoming increasingly relevant, as the early years of a child's life form the foundation for physical growth, cognitive development, emotional regulation and long-term health outcomes.

It is during this stage that the body and brain are undergoing rapid changes and the role of nutrition cannot be ignored.

From providing energy to fuel our days, to supporting our immune functions and brain development, food and more important nutrient dense food, is vital for well-being in the early years.

Today I will explore the benefits of a well-balanced diet that is rich in essential nutrients, and how it can positively influence physical health, mental well-being, behaviour and future lifestyle choices.

At the same time, I will highlight the consequences of unfavourable diets, such as those high in added sugars and saturated fats, which continue to pose a threat to children's health across the UK and globally.

Additionally, I will explore alternative dietary patterns, with a specific focus on veganism.

And finally a key part of today's presentation is to consider the role of early years practitioners. I will discuss the responsibility and opportunity that professionals in early childhood settings have to support children's nutritional needs, both in general and when accommodating vegan or alternative diets. And hopefully by looking at real world barriers such as income inequality, social challenges and gaps in education, we will also explore how collaboration with families, additional training and government led strategies can help bridge these gaps to give every child the healthiest possible best start in life.

The early years of a child's life are truly remarkable, filled with rapid physical and cognitive growth! Because of this it's crucial to provide adequate nutrition during this vital time to support their optimal development and neurological health.

Research shows that a balanced diet, rich in essential nutrients, not only supports brain development but also enhances emotional well-being. On the other hand, poor dietary habits can lead to developmental delays and even behavioural challenges (Pérez-Escamilla and Moran 2017).

We all know that food fuels the body, but for babies and young children, it does a great deal more. Not only does it serve as fuel, but it also aids in brain development, builds immune systems, and lays the foundation for their physical and emotional health. However, many children globally, as well as right here on our own doorsteps,

are not receiving the vital nutrients they need. Consequently, there are numerous repercussions (Kuzemchak, 2022).

According to UNICEF, at least one in three children under the age of five, which equates to 200 million children globally, are either undernourished or overweight. Even more alarmingly, nearly two in three children between the ages of six months and two years are not being fed food that properly supports their rapidly growing bodies and brains. This puts them at risk of poor brain development, weak immunity, increased infection rates, and, even more worryingly, death (Unicef, 2019).

Multiple studies have highlighted concerns regarding young children's diets in the United Kingdom. One particular study by the National Diet and Nutrition Survey revealed that children between the ages of 1 and 5 often exceeded the recommended levels of sugar and saturated fats while failing to meet the daily recommended amount of fibre (Public Health England, 2020).

The issue with this is that high consumption of added sugars and saturated fats during early childhood can be associated with various health issues. Excessive sugar intake has been linked with an increased risk of obesity, it can affect insulin resistance and have a detrimental effect of children's teeth (Tahir, 2019).

There are concerns that these dietary imbalances can contribute to the rising prevalence of childhood obesity and the health issues that are related to it (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2024).

However, by simply educating parents and early years practitioners on the detrimental effects of excessive sugar intake and providing them with strategies, such as extra educational training or environmental modifications, such as limiting access to sugary drinks, hopefully, they can mitigate the detrimental effects (Bleiweiss-Sande, 2021).

The Welsh government has also taken significant steps to mitigate these effects through a wide range of policy updates, public health guidance and environmental interventions. Just recently, in 2024, they updated their dietary advice for children between the ages of 1 and 5 years. They recommended that free sugars make up no more than 5% of a child's total dietary energy intake (Welsh Government, 2024). Also advising that dairy products, such as yoghurt and yoghurt drinks, are unsweetened (Welsh Government, 2024). To help support such policies, the Welsh government also announced an investment of 5.5 million pounds as part of the Healthy Weight, Health Wales strategy. It hopes that this funding will provide improved access to nutritious food and drink, increased drinking water availability and investment in promoting healthier lifestyles, such as cycling and walking routes (Welsh Government, 2020). These interventions collectively represent a comprehensive approach to addressing the overconsumption of sugar and its health implications in early childhood across Wales.

However, it is not always that simple and access to healthy food still remains a significant challenge for so many children, especially those from low-income families. A review by Redsell et al., (2021) highlighted that environmental factors such as low income and even ethnicity can serve as barriers to responsive feeding practices, which are known to be crucial for promoting healthy eating in early childhood. When these factors are present, it can lead to restrictive eating patterns, thus adversely affecting children's eating behaviours and their overall health (Redsell et al, 2021).

Supporting this a further study by Jones et al (2023), identified several barriers to families being able to have healthy meals. These included barriers such as time constraints, financial limitations and more often than not a child's own preference for unhealthy foods. These challenges combined can make it difficult for parents to provide nutritious meals consistently. And because of this, it could lead to children and their families feeling unwell, experiencing negative health and having an overall unhappy lifestyle.

A report by Public Health Wales (2024) supports this, reporting that social factors, rather than lack of knowledge or skills, are the primary barriers preventing families from maintaining healthy weights. Factors such as the prevalence of unhealthy food, with these options often being cheaper than their healthier counterparts, are the most significant obstacles.

Additionally, Wales also offers the Flying Start Food and Nutrition Team, which runs the Little Cooks programme, a practical cookery initiative designed for children in early years settings. This programme aims to engage children in food preparation, enhancing their understanding of healthy eating while developing fine motor coordination and numeracy skills. It also supports settings in achieving the Gold Standard Healthy Snack Award and aligns with the Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Scheme (Flying Start Cardiff, n.d.).

Next, we will discuss the vegan diet and its benefits and cons in early childhood.

Recently, there has been an increase in alternative diets such as the vegan diet. Although in early childhood there can be notable benefits, this diet also comes with potential detriments, depending on how well it is planned and monitored (Kiely, 2021).

Positively, a vegan diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts and seeds can promote healthy growth, as well as support the child's immune system and reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases later on in life, such as obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. There is evidence to suggest that children raised on a well-balanced vegan diet may also have lower cholesterol levels and better fibre intake, compared to their peers who have an omnivorous diet. Furthermore, children exposed early on to a variety of plant-based foods could be encouraged to continue with lifelong healthy eating habits (Desmond et al, 2021).

However, significant concerns have been raised that must be addressed to avoid nutritional deficiencies. Vital nutrients such as vitamin B12, iron, calcium, zinc and

Omega-3 fatty acids are more challenging to obtain from a strictly plant-based diet. They may require fortified food or supplements to meet a growing child's developmental needs. This is because inadequate intake of these nutrients can lead to developmental delays, weakened bones, anaemia and even cognitive impairments (Jenkins et al, 2020; Neufingerl and Eliander, 2023).

As well as these concerns around the nutrients that can and cannot be obtained, the restrictive nature of a vegan diet may also pose social challenges for young children, particularly in group settings like nursery, school, and parties, where the food choices may be limited (Hunt, 2021).

In the settings, early years practitioners can play a pivotal role in supporting children on vegan diets, helping ensure all their nutritional needs are met while fostering an inclusive and educational environment. However, given the complexities associated with a plant-based diet, practitioners must be well informed and proactive in their approach.

There are many ways to do this, and one step is to ensure that they establish clear and open communication with parents. This collaborative approach ensures that the child's dietary needs are consistently met, both at home and in their educational setting. Open discussions also ensure that the child's diet aligns with cultural and ethical considerations in the setting (Williams, 2022).

Another way to enable practitioners with the knowledge they need to help provide alternative diets in their settings would again be with continuous professional development. Practitioners must receive proper training on nutrition, focusing on the specific needs of vegan and other alternative diets. This training equips staff to confidently plan and prepare meals that support the child's health, development, and cultural needs. Practitioners should also ensure that they regularly monitor the child's development, observing any changes in health or behaviour. This allows practitioners to identify any potential nutritional deficiencies that occur and will enable them to intervene if needed (Gerritsen, 2016; Wallace et al 2024).

Now to conclude, the evidence presented is clear: the early years of a child's life are not only critical for physical and cognitive development but also for establishing long-lasting dietary habits that will shape their future health and well-being.

And unfortunately, despite increased public awareness, many children continue to face dietary imbalances, whether this is due to excessive consumption of sugar and saturated fats or a lack of access to nutrient-dense food. The impact of these poor dietary habits underlines the need for awareness and action, both at individual and policy levels.

While there are some promising developments, such as the updated guidance from the Welsh government and initiatives like the Flying Start Little Cooks program that have been mentioned here, we must also acknowledge the ongoing challenges many families are facing, especially those with low income.

We can see that for many, the issue is not just a lack of knowledge, but instead it is about access , affordability and consistent support.

Ultimately, supporting children's nutritional health is not just about the food we provide them; it is also about equity, education and empowerment.

Whether it is through direct care with parents, educational setting and the practitioners or policy implementations, every adult involved in a child's life has a role to play in giving the healthiest possible foundation, a foundation they can use to build a healthy lifestyle with healthy choices later on.

It has been a pleasure to present to you today; thank you for taking the time to listen.

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Nutrition education for early childhood managers, teachers and nursery cooks: A prerequisite for effective obesity prevention

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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs image(17) Pinterest

Figure 3.1. Absolute poverty (AHC), overall and for different groups.jpg (848×523)
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Juliet Young (@creative.clinical.psychologist) • Instagram photos and videos

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Evaluation the health lifestyle of kindergarten students at Mosul city/Iraq

Younis Nasir Muwfaq:

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Figure 1: Dahlgren and Whitehead model

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