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ECEY5009 - Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyles

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Children's Health, Wellbeing, and Lifestyles

Health

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 1948) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." This definition allowed others to consider health as more than physical ailments alone and consider psychological impacts.

However, it has been criticised for being reductionist, as achieving a state of wellbeing simply because of a lack of ailments does not fully encompass the idea of 'being well'. Krahn et al argues that health should instead be viewed as a balance between physical, mental and social wellbeing, alongside an individual's ability to adapt to life changes and effectively manage their own health.



Wellbeing

As described by the NHS (2022), wellbeing is "the way that people feel about themselves and their lives." This definition highlights the subjective nature of wellbeing, recognising that an individual's perceptions, emotions and satisfaction contribute significantly to their overall quality of life. Similarly, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) states that wellbeing is closely linked to quality of life and an individual's ability to cope with everyday stresses and support themselves and others through everyday life. When reviewed together, these definitions suggest that wellbeing looks at factors beyond physical health alone, encompassing emotional, social and psychological factors that influence an individual's overall life experience.

Lifestyles

Many sources highlight the complex nature of defining 'lifestyle' (Brivio, 2023). Rather than referring to a single behaviour, lifestyle encompasses a range of daily choices, habits and environmental influences that can affect an individual's health and wellbeing. When discussing children's lifestyles, the NHS (2025) focuses on factors such as diet, physical activity, sleep and overall health behaviours. However, in early childhood, lifestyle choices are often shaped by parents, caregivers and wider social influences rather than the child alone. Therefore, children's lifestyles should be understood as a combination of individual behaviours and the social, economic and environmental factors that influence their everyday experiences.



Why are they important

The NHS (2026) states that positive health and wellbeing can have significant life-long benefits. These benefits include improved mood and happiness, enhanced mental health, and an increased ability to recover from illness. Positive wellbeing/attitudes can also contribute to greater resilience and a more positive outlook which can benefit relationships and therefore a person's environment.

The NHS also suggests that maintaining good physical and mental health may contribute to increased life expectancy. Health and wellbeing are closely linked, influencing an individual's ability to maintain healthy habits, a positive outlook and even support maintaining relationships as well as many benefits for overall health.

Health and wellbeing are particularly important for children as they provide the foundation for healthy physical and mental growth and development. The NSPCC (2025) highlights that promoting children's health and wellbeing supports their safety, emotional security and overall development. Children who experience positive health and wellbeing are more likely to develop confidence which can help them achieve better educational outcomes. Public Health England (2026) states that the experiences through pregnancy and the early years impacts a person's health as an adult, explaining why support through pregnancy and in the early years is so important.

Theory

The NSPCC (ND) discusses how a child's health and wellbeing is significantly impacted by their environment. This concept is supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979) who created the ecological systems theory and states that a child's immediate environment has the most significant impact on their development; looking at this with the NSPCC, it can be seen that many valuable sources credit a child's environment for their health, whether it be a positive or negative outcome. However, this discipline of thought is opposed by Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) who believe the largest contributing factor to a child's health is their genetics, then spanning out to lifestyle factors and eventually environmental and social factors; although it does not omit the involvement of social and environmental impacts it places a much lower emphasis on them than Bronfenbrenner and the NSPCC.

Koch *et al* (2026) delves into Bandura's (1961) Bobo Doll experiment and how it explains children's ability to learn from mimicry and observation. Albert Bandura (1971) created the Social Learning Theory which provides an explanation based off of the Bobo Doll experiment planted in the basis of learning, and habits, being based on observational learning; this again reinforces Bronfenbrenner's idea of social environments and close relations most heavily impacting behaviours, however Bandura's Social Learning theory differs from Bronfenbrenner's as Bandura places higher value on complete observation and mimicry, whereas Bronfenbrenner has a higher emphasis on the social environment a child is in.

Impacting Factors

There are a variety of factors which can impede on a child's health, wellbeing and lifestyle.

Economic factors

The Faculty of Public Health (n.d.) argues that poverty is a significant factor which impacts health and wellbeing, with individuals and families experiencing financial hardship being at greater risk of poor health. Low income can reduce access to food high in nutritional value increasing the likelihood of poor diets and, in turn, poor health. In some cases, families may struggle to afford a sufficient amount of food, which can negatively impact children's growth, development and overall wellbeing. Poverty can also affect living conditions, with some families residing in inadequate housing that may contain damp, mould or poor insulation (Healthier Futures, ND.). These conditions can contribute to respiratory issues, poor sleep quality and increased stress. Furthermore, financial hardship may limit access to recreational activities, healthcare services and educational opportunities. This demonstrates that poverty can influence health through multiple pathways, affecting both physical health and emotional wellbeing.

Environmental factors

There are also environmental factors that play a key role in the health and wellbeing of children. Smith (2023) states that those living in lower income neighbourhoods are more likely to face issues regarding health and wellbeing due to financial cuts from the government reducing funding for support. The Health Foundation (2024) supports this idea of poor health in low income households by exploring the correlation between crime in high poverty neighbourhoods and also the fact that those living in these low income neighbourhoods are more likely to see or experience crime which in turn causes them to be afraid to go out, leading to a reduction in outdoor exercise. This is detrimental to children as they would likely not be allowed out to play alone or with friends and would need to be accompanied by an adult which can sometimes be difficult for parents to find the time.

Social Factors

Children are heavily reliant on their parents for support. In the early years of a child's life, they are likely to have limited interaction with those outside of their family. This means they are highly likely to mimic the behaviours, attitudes and lifestyle choices of their parents and family members. For example, parents can influence children's eating habits, physical activity levels and emotional responses through their own behaviours and routines. This concept is supported by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and his Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the importance of the child's immediate environment and close relationships in shaping development. This idea of closeness and its impact on development is also supported by Bowlby (1969), who claimed that if a child has insecure attachments it can cause feelings of anxiety and insecurity, which may negatively impact their wellbeing and future relationships. Therefore, positive family relationships are important in supporting healthy development and wellbeing.

Individual Factors

Children are often reliant on their parents to shape their lifestyles, habits and promote a healthy lifestyle. During the early years, children have little control over many aspects of their daily lives, meaning that parents are a key catalyst in influencing behaviours related to health and wellbeing. A child's diet is typically a parent's responsibility, as young children are unable to prepare their own meals, it is therefore important that parents ensure their child's diet is nutritionally balanced (American Psychological Association, 2023). Parents also influence levels of physical activity, sleep routines and attitudes towards health. Wilson *et al.* (2025) claim that parental education has a large effect on a child's healthy lifestyle. Their study found that following parental education on healthy eating and regular exercise, both overall health outcomes and knowledge of healthy lifestyles improved, highlighting the importance of parental involvement in promoting positive health behaviours.

Legislation and Help

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, ND) states that “every child has the right to good health”. This article highlights not only a child's right to access healthcare services, but also the importance of promoting good health and wellbeing from an early age. This article emphasises the responsibility of the government and professionals to ensure that parents and carers have access to information that supports children's health, nutrition and development. This demonstrates the importance of a collaborative approach between families, healthcare services and educational settings in promoting positive outcomes for children.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is an important piece of legislation that highlights the importance of prioritising health and wellbeing. The Act aims to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales and recognises that positive health outcomes are essential for future generations. Importantly, the Act also acknowledges mental wellbeing alongside physical health, reflecting a more holistic understanding of health and wellbeing.

The Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009 further supports children's health by ensuring that schools and local authorities promote healthy eating and provide access to nutritious food. This is particularly important for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as schools can help reduce inequalities in access to healthy meals and nutritional education.

Alongside legislation, a range of support services and initiatives are available to children and families.

For example, the PIPYN Project enables carers of children aged 3–7 to develop knowledge and understanding of healthy eating, exercise and positive lifestyle habits (Cwm Taf Morgannwg Health Board, ND). Similarly, the Food and Fun programme provides children with opportunities for social interaction, physical activity and continued learning during the summer holidays. Such initiatives demonstrate the importance of community support in promoting children's health, wellbeing and lifestyles both within and beyond educational settings.

What Can We Do?

As practitioners, it is important to ensure that healthy eating and mental wellbeing are actively supported and promoted within educational settings (UK Government, 2021). Early years practitioners can encourage healthy eating by modelling positive behaviours, providing opportunities to learn about nutrition and working in partnership with families to promote healthy habits both at home and within the setting. Supporting healthy eating from an early age can help children develop positive relationships with food and establish healthy habits that may continue throughout later life.

Schools and early years settings also have a responsibility to provide opportunities for regular physical activity, while educating children about the importance of movement, exercise and healthy sleep patterns (UK Government, 2025). Physical activity not only benefits physical health but can also improve mood, confidence and overall wellbeing. Encouraging active play can therefore support both health and development.

In addition, practitioners have an important role in supporting emotional literacy and mental wellbeing. Children should be given opportunities to recognise, understand and express their emotions in a safe and supportive environment. Many schools utilise Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) to provide additional support for children experiencing emotional or social difficulties (Public Health Wales, ND). Developing children's emotional literacy can improve self-regulation, resilience and positive relationships with others.



Calmsage, ND

Practitioners should also work collaboratively with families to strengthen relationships and encourage open communication about emotions, thoughts and feelings. Positive family relationships can help children feel secure and supported, which contributes to positive mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, inclusive practice and personalised support can help children develop confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. This reflects Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which suggests that feelings of belonging and acceptance are essential foundations for achieving self-actualisation and reaching one's full potential.

Conclusion

Children's health, wellbeing and lifestyles are shaped by a complex interaction of individual, social, economic and environmental factors. Throughout the early years, family relationships, parenting practices and parental education and knowledge, living conditions and access to resources can significantly influence children's development and future health outcomes. Theories such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Dahlgren and Whitehead's model of the social determinants of health demonstrate that children's health is influenced by interconnected systems rather than isolated factors or individual choices alone. This highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach when supporting children and families. Early years practitioners also play a vital role in promoting positive health and wellbeing through supportive, inclusive and evidence-based practice, while working in partnership with families and other professionals to help children achieve the best possible health and wellbeing throughout their lives, helping expand knowledge to carry them through to their adult years.

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