

Well-being, care and healthy living.

Introduction

This poster will focus on the importance of promoting health, well-being and healthy lifestyles within the early years. It will explore the significant influences these areas have on children's overall development and future life outcomes.

Early childhood is a crucial period of rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social development, during this period relationships and environments can contribute to establishing lifelong patterns of health and well-being. As well as this, the promotion of health within early years should extend beyond the prevention of illnesses and should also focus on having a balanced diet, ensuring physical activity opportunities, emotional security, positive relationships, adequate sleep and safety. The World Health Organization (WHO) UNICEF and World Bank (2018) identifies the above and how they are interconnected components of nurturing care. This helps to demonstrate that children's development cannot be considered separate from the relationships and environments in which they grow.

Concepts

Health and well-being should be understood as multidimensional concepts rather than simply the absence of physical illness. Children's physical, emotional, social, and psychological development are interconnected. For example, inadequate nutrition may affect physical growth and energy, while insufficient sleep can influence children's concentration, behavior, and emotional regulation. Similarly, insecure relationships or stressful environments can affect children's psychological well-being and potentially their physical development. This demonstrates why early years practitioners need to consider the whole child rather than addressing individual areas of development separately.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a useful framework for considering the conditions required for children to develop and participate in learning. Maslow proposed that human needs can be understood through five levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Although the hierarchy and universal nature of the model have been criticized, it remains relevant to early years practice because it highlights the importance of meeting children's fundamental needs.

The first level, physiological needs, includes food, water, warmth and rest. For an early years child, these needs have a direct impact on health, development and learning. A hungry, thirsty or tired child may find it more difficult to concentrate, regulate their emotions, or participate in play. The second level, safety, includes protection from harm and the need for predictable and secure environments. Early years practitioners therefore have responsibilities relating to safeguarding, hygiene, supervision, and emotional security.

The third level, love and belonging, is particularly relevant to attachment and relationships. Children require positive relationships with caregivers and practitioners to develop a sense of security and belonging. Esteem relates to children developing confidence and sense of competence, which can be supported when practitioners recognize the children's achievements, encourage independence and value their contributions. Finally, self-actualization can be associated with children having opportunities to explore, learn, create, and reach their potential.

Maslow therefore demonstrates that health promotion cannot be separated from well-being or learning. Practitioners cannot reasonably expect children to engage fully in educational experiences if fundamental physiological, safety, or emotional needs are not met. This is consistent with the WHO's Nurturing Care Framework.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory demonstrates that children's development is influenced by the environments and relationships surrounding them. The microsystem refers to the immediate settings in which children participate and interact, such as the family and early years setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). This is particularly relevant to health and well-being because children's experiences within these environments can influence their physical, emotional and social development. Furthermore, relationships between children's immediate environments, such as communication between families and early years practitioners, can influence development through the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).

Well-being

Well-being extends beyond physical health and includes children's emotional, psychological, and social experiences. A child may be physically healthy but experience poor well-being if they feel anxious, insecure, excluded or unable to develop positive relationships. Early years practitioners therefore have an important role in creating environments where children feel safe, valued, listened to and respected. This reflects a holistic understanding of well-being, where children's physical, emotional, and social needs are recognized as interconnected.

Research by (Bowlby, J. 1969) shows how his attachment theory highlights the importance of early relationships in children's emotional development. He proposed that consistent and responsive relationships with caregivers can provide children with a sense of security and confidence to explore their environment. (Ainsworth et al. 1978 p. 310 - 325) developed this work through research into attachment patterns and demonstrated the importance of sensitive caregiving. Within an early year setting, positive relationships with practitioners can therefore provide children with a secure base from which they can explore, play, and learn. This can be supported through consistent key-person approaches, predictable routines, and responsive interactions.

Bowlby's theory can also be linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. (Maslow, A.H., 1943, pp. 376–381) identifies safety, love, and belonging as important human needs. For young children, these needs can be supported when practitioners provide consistent care, positive relationships, and an environment where children feel a sense of belonging. Meeting these needs may contribute to children's confidence and emotional security, enabling them to engage more positively with learning and social experiences.

According to (Vygotsky, L.S., 1978, p. 86) sociocultural theory further emphasizes the importance of relationships and social interaction in children's development. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that children can achieve more with appropriate guidance from adults or more capable peers than they may achieve independently. In early years practice, practitioners can support well-being and learning by encouraging communication, cooperation, problem-solving and shared play. These experiences can help children develop social skills, confidence, and independence.

Research also supports an integrated approach to children's well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning as important components of early childhood development and recommends that these are considered alongside health and nutrition (WHO, 2020, pp. 11–12). This demonstrates that emotional well-being cannot be separated from children's wider development.

The physical environment is also important. Safe and stimulating indoor and outdoor spaces provide opportunities for movement, exploration, creativity, and social interaction. The Curriculum for Wales recognizes physical health, mental health, and emotional and social well-being as interconnected areas (Welsh Government, 2022). Practitioners should therefore create environments that enable children to experience positive well-being, while listening to children's views and providing appropriate choices. This supports children's developing independence, confidence, and sense of self-worth.

Health

Physical health during the early years includes nutrition, physical activity, sleep, oral health, hygiene, illness prevention, growth and opportunities for safe movement and exploration. These factors are significant because early childhood provides an important opportunity to establish positive health behaviors. Nutrition is particularly important because young children require adequate nutrients to support growth, brain development, and energy. Early years settings can promote healthy eating by providing nutritious food, encouraging children to experience a variety of foods, and creating positive social experiences around mealtimes. Nutrition should be considered alongside relationships and learning. The (WHO) guidance indicates that nutrition interventions alone may not produce the same developmental benefits as approaches that combine nutrition with responsive caregiving and opportunities for learning.

Physical activity is another important element. Active play contributes to physical development, coordination, gross and fine motor skills, confidence, and social interaction. Early years environments should therefore provide regular opportunities for children to move, explore outdoors and develop physical competence. Froebel's philosophy is particularly relevant to early years practice because he viewed play, nature and children's direct experiences as central to learning and development. His approach recognizes that children as whole beings whose physical, emotional, social and cognitive development are interconnected, with play providing opportunities for children to explore and make sense of the world through first-hand experiences (Froebel Trust, 2022).

According to Bandura's (Bandura, A., 1977, p.22) social learning theory also provides an explanation for how healthy behaviours develop. Children learn through observing and imitating significant adults. Practitioners and parents therefore act as role models. When adults demonstrate positive attitudes towards nutritious food, physical activity and self-care, children are provided with opportunities to observe healthy behaviours in meaningful contexts.

Health promotion must also acknowledge inequalities. Children's opportunities to live healthily can be affected by family income, housing, employment, access to green spaces and availability of affordable nutritious food. The Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2025) recognizes the importance of early intervention and identifies early childhood as an important period for developing healthy behaviors. This demonstrates the importance of preventative approaches that support families rather than placing blame upon them.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 promotes long-term thinking, prevention, collaboration, integration and involvement, with a healthier Wales and a more equal Wales among its national well-being goals. These principles are highly relevant to early years health promotion because prevention during childhood can contribute to improved long-term health outcomes.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle refers to the everyday behaviours and routines that can influence health and development. During early childhood, these are largely shaped by adults, families and the environments available to children. Establishing positive routines around food, activity, sleep, hygiene and outdoor play can therefore contribute to healthier patterns as children develop.

The Welsh Government's Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales Delivery Plan 2025–2027 places children and young people at the centre of its approach and identifies the early years as an important period for establishing healthy behaviours. It also recognises the relationship between nutrition, physical activity, mental health and well-being (Welsh Government, 2025). This supports preventative approaches in which healthy choices are incorporated naturally into children's everyday experiences.

Montessori's approach is relevant because of its emphasis on independence and practical life experiences. Children can participate in developmentally appropriate activities such as handwashing, food preparation, gardening, tidying and caring for their environment (Montessori, 1967, pp. 83–84). These activities allow children to develop practical skills while gaining confidence and responsibility. Rather than adults completing every task for children, appropriate opportunities for participation can help children develop independence and self-care skills.

Lifestyle should, however, be considered within the context of children's individual circumstances. Families may have different cultural practices, financial resources, working patterns and access to community facilities. These factors can influence the opportunities available to children and should be recognised when promoting healthy lifestyles. A non-judgemental partnership with parents and carers is therefore important, allowing practitioners to share information, understand family circumstances and identify appropriate support.

Overall, a healthy lifestyle in the early years should not be reduced to body weight or individual food choices. It should include enjoyable experiences that encourage movement, nutritious eating, rest, hygiene, independence and positive relationships. This reflects the wider Welsh approach to health and well-being, which recognises that different aspects of health are interconnected and influenced by children's experiences and circumstances (Welsh Government, 2022).that support physical health,

Conclusion

Health, well-being and lifestyle are closely connected aspects of early childhood development. The theories considered demonstrate that children's outcomes are influenced not only by their physical needs but also by relationships, environments, social experiences and opportunities for participation. Maslow highlights the importance of meeting fundamental needs, while Bronfenbrenner demonstrates the influence of children's wider environments. Bowlby and Ainsworth emphasise secure and responsive relationships, Vygotsky highlights social interaction, Froebel demonstrates the value of play and nature, Bandura highlights the influence of role modelling, and Montessori provides a focus on independence and practical life experiences.

Evidence and Welsh policy reinforce the importance of early intervention and prevention. Effective early years practice should therefore provide nutritious food, opportunities for physical activity, safe and stimulating environments, secure relationships and opportunities for children to develop independence. However, practitioners must recognise that children's experiences are influenced by family circumstances and wider inequalities also. A holistic and inclusive approach, supported by effective partnership with families and other professionals, can help create the conditions in which children are able to develop, learn and experience positive health and well-being.

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