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ECEY5009:

Well-being, Care & Healthy lifestyles

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1. Poster

Health, Well-being & Lifestyle

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Introduction: The Early Years, from birth to age five, are crucial for establishing lifelong health, well-being, and lifestyle habits. During this period, children undergo rapid development, making nurturing environments and early interventions essential (WHO, 2020). Health encompasses physical growth and preventive care (PHE, 2021), while well-being is linked to emotional security and social connections (EEF, 2021). Lifestyle includes daily behaviours such as diet, physical activity, and sleep (Timmons et al., 2020). Additionally, socio-economic and environmental factors significantly influence outcomes (Bradbury et al., 2021). This assignment will explore these concepts, relevant theories, and government policies, and will consider how practitioners can promote positive, holistic development in early childhood.

Health in the Early Years:

Health in the early years refers to a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in young children, going beyond merely the absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organisation, 2020). This developmental stage typically lasts from birth to age five and is increasingly recognised as vital for laying the foundations of health behaviours and biological growth. In this context, health encompasses a wide range of areas, including physical growth, motor development, immunisation, mental resilience, emotional regulation, and the presence of safe and nurturing environments. According to Public Health Wales (2022), experiences during the early years not only impact immediate health outcomes but also shape a child's long-term well-being, learning abilities, and socio-emotional functioning. A holistic understanding of early childhood health acknowledges the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and social dimensions. For instance, a child's ability to regulate emotions is closely tied to secure relationships and consistent routines, all of which depend on adequate nutrition, rest, and a stable home environment. Cooke et al. (2019) emphasise that a poor diet in early childhood can hinder attention, emotional regulation, and physical growth, ultimately diminishing children's capacity for engaging in learning and forming positive relationships. Therefore, health in the early years is not isolated from broader lifestyle and environmental factors; it is influenced by the quality of care, opportunities for active play, emotional support, and the socio-economic context in which the child is raised.



Figure 1: The 5 Stages of Childhood Development (Labhsetwar 2023)

Traditionally, health has been understood through the medical model, which focuses on diagnosing and treating disease. In early childhood, this model has significantly contributed to improvements in infant mortality and the management of infectious diseases through immunisation programs and early screenings (Naidoo and Wills, 2021). However, its limitations have become increasingly evident. The medical model is reactive and lacking, often overlooking broader factors of health, such as family circumstances, housing, income, and emotional security. In contrast, contemporary Early Years practice embraces a holistic model of health that includes preventative approaches and acknowledges the impact of social and emotional factors on children's development. This perspective aligns with policies and guidance in Wales that prioritise early intervention, equity, and the rights of the child (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). The holistic approach to early childhood health is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs remains highly relevant, proposing that children's basic physiological needs, such as food, warmth, and sleep, and must be satisfied before they can meaningfully engage in learning and emotional development. Maslow also emphasised the importance of safety, love, and belonging, all of which are critical in Early Years settings that support emotional and psychological growth (Maslow, cited in Naidoo and Wills, 2021). For instance, a child who is consistently hungry or lacks secure attachments may struggle to engage with their environment or peers, illustrating how unmet basic needs can hinder both health and learning.



Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs adapted for early childhood development (McLeod, 2023). Use this image to visually demonstrate how children's basic needs must be met before cognitive and emotional development can flourish.



Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory illustrating the multiple environments influencing a child's development (Education Scotland, 2022).

This diagram supports the idea that children's health is shaped not only by direct care but also by wider socio-economic and policy influences.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a valuable perspective by suggesting that a child's health is influenced by multiple layers, ranging from immediate family and caregivers to broader socio-economic and political structures. This model emphasises the importance of recognising how policies, community support systems, and cultural norms impact children's development and health outcomes (Bradbury, Gunter, and James, 2021). Within this framework, Early Years practitioners are encouraged to collaborate with families and external agencies to create environments that promote both health and well-being. The significance of these broader factors of health is further highlighted in the Marmot Review: Health Equity in England, Ten Years On, which advocates for increased investment in early childhood as a means to address health inequalities (Marmot et al., 2020). Marmot identifies early intervention, family support, and high-quality childcare as critical factors for improving population health and promoting social justice. Although the review is based on data from England, its principles are highly relevant in Wales, where public health policy also emphasises equity, prevention, and child-centred practices.

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Figure 4: Summary of children's rights under the UNCRC, including the right to health and development (UNICEF UK, 2020). Helpful for linking health and well-being to Article 24 and rights-based legislation in Wales.

In Wales, the policy landscape promotes a rights-based and integrated approach to children's health. The Healthy Child Wales Programme offers structured support from pregnancy through the early years, which includes screening, immunisation, health promotion, and developmental checks (Public Health Wales, 2023). The Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasises health and well-being, encouraging practitioners to help children develop positive relationships, emotional literacy, and physical skills. Additionally, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public services to adopt a long-term perspective in supporting children's well-being, ensuring that strategies are effective now and sustainable in the future. Importantly, the rights of the child are embedded in Welsh law, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 24 of the UNCRC states that every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health. The Welsh Government embraces this principle through its commitment to child-centred and inclusive services (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). This rights-based approach emphasises that health in the Early Years should not be viewed only in terms of clinical outcomes but should also consider access, equity, and dignity.



Figure 5: Article 24 of the Children's Rights Act (The Busimas Charitable Foundation, 2025).

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Well-being in the Early Years:

Well-being in the Early Years refers to a child's overall experience of feeling secure, valued, emotionally balanced, and capable of engaging meaningfully with their surroundings. It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses emotional, psychological, social, and physical elements. According to Dodge et al. (2012), well-being is best understood as the balance between an individual's resources and the challenges they encounter. In early childhood, this means ensuring that children have supportive relationships, structured routines, nurturing environments, and emotional tools to navigate their early life experiences. Recently, the Welsh Government (2022) has emphasised that well-being is both a right and a developmental necessity, highlighting its importance in the Curriculum for Wales. Historically, early definitions of well-being in childhood were limited, often equating it solely with physical health or happiness. However, modern perspectives in developmental psychology broaden the concept to include a child's sense of purpose, emotional security, autonomy, and relationships. La Placa, McNaught, and Knight (2020) argue that well-being is socially constructed and context-dependent, meaning that what constitutes well-being in early childhood is shaped by familial, cultural, and educational environments.

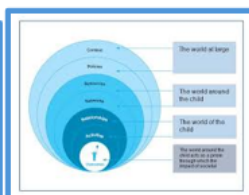


Figure 7: UNICEF framework outlining social, educational and emotional contributors to child well-being (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020).

Two main philosophical approaches shape the conversation about well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic. The hedonic approach emphasises pleasure, happiness, and the avoidance of discomfort. In the context of early childhood, this means helping children feel joyful, safe, and comforted through play, praise, and secure attachments. While positive emotions are undeniably superior, this viewpoint can sometimes overemphasise short-term gratification at the expense of long-term development. In contrast, the eudaimonic perspective centres on purpose, personal growth, and fulfilling one's potential, even if it involves effort or facing challenges (Ryan and Deci, 2019). Ryff and Singer's model of eudaimonic well-being, originally developed for adults, has clear applications in early childhood. Young children thrive when provided with opportunities to master new skills, establish close relationships, and contribute meaningfully to their learning environments (Ryff and Singer, 2008; cited in La Placa et al., 2020). This perspective is increasingly reflected in Early Years frameworks, such as the Curriculum for Wales (2022), which encourages children to develop self-awareness, emotional literacy, and resilience, key components of eudaimonic well-being.

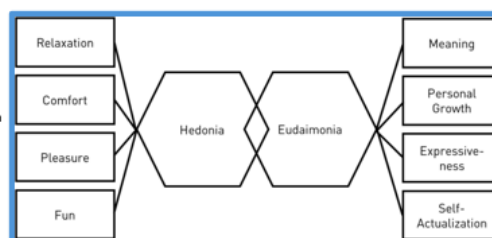


Figure 6: The hedonic-eudaimonic dyad of psychological well-being (Seaborn, Pennefather and Fels, 2019).

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In Early Years settings, well-being is supported not only through routines and care but also through relationships. The importance of nurturing adult-child connections in promoting well-being is powerfully emphasised in Rita Pierson's TED Talk, "Every Kid Needs a Champion" (2013). Pierson's message aligns strongly with current child-centred pedagogical approaches. She argues that strong relationships with caring adults can be transformative, especially for children who may face challenges at home or in their communities. Her assertion that "kids don't learn from people they don't like" highlights the emotional aspect of Early Years education, emphasising that well-being and learning are deeply interconnected (Pierson, 2013).

**"I AM SOMEBODY.
I WAS SOMEBODY WHEN
I CAME. I WILL BE A
BETTER SOMEBODY
WHEN I LEAVE.
I AM POWERFUL,
AND I AM STRONG.
I DESERVE THE
EDUCATION THAT I GET
HERE. I HAVE THINGS
TO DO, PEOPLE TO
IMPRESS, AND PLACES
TO GO."
- RITA PIERSON**

Figure 8: "Every child deserves a champion" – Rita Pierson, TED Talk (2013). Underscores the emotional importance of supportive adult relationships in promoting well-being.

This relational emphasis is also supported by research into attachment theory and social-emotional learning. Taggart, Sikora and Rees (2019) emphasise that warm, consistent interactions with caregivers foster emotional security and social competence in young children. Such secure attachments contribute to both hedonic well-being (feeling safe and happy) and eudaimonic well-being (developing resilience and autonomy). Early Years practitioners are therefore not only educators, but also emotional co-regulators and role models who play a crucial part in a child's well-being journey.

In Wales, the rights-based approach to Early Years care emphasises the importance of well-being. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advocates for the development of a child's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential, a principle that closely aligns with eudaimonic well-being. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 further emphasises the responsibility of public services to promote well-being from a holistic and long-term perspective. This commitment is reflected in the Curriculum for Wales, where health and well-being is one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE). It promotes a proactive, preventative, and inclusive approach to children's development (Welsh Government, 2022).

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Lifestyle in the Early Years:
Lifestyle in the Early Years refers to the combination of daily habits, behaviours, and environmental factors that influence a child's overall physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. These factors include dietary intake, levels of physical activity, sleep routines, personal hygiene, screen time, and opportunities for both free and structured play. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018), these foundational behaviours significantly shape health routes into adolescence and adulthood. In the context of early childhood, lifestyle is not solely the responsibility of the individual child; it is deeply rooted in family culture, community practices, and policy-driven frameworks.



Figure 9: Children participating in a healthy eating routine in an early years setting (Public Health Wales, 2022).

In Wales, promoting a healthy lifestyle during the Early Years is emphasised through various strategies. The Welsh Government's Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales (2019) highlights early childhood as a critical period for preventing obesity and encouraging positive health behaviours. Similarly, the Welsh Government's Play Policy (2002) recognises play as an essential part of a healthy lifestyle, contributing not only to physical development but also to emotional regulation, creativity, and social skills. This policy aligns with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which serves as a guiding framework for the Children's Commissioner for Wales. The Commissioner ensures that children's rights, including their rights to health, play, and development, are upheld in all Early Years services.

Government-funded programs, such as Flying Start, provide targeted interventions in disadvantaged areas. These services assist parents in establishing routines around healthy meals, physical activity, and early communication. The aims of these programs are supported by NICE guidelines (2021), which recommend a multi-agency approach to improving child well-being through consistent routines and family support. Initiatives like the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools also actively work with early years settings to integrate healthy behaviours into the curriculum and daily routines, helping children develop lifelong habits from a young age.

Lifestyle behaviours are influenced not only by access to resources and education but also by an individual's psychological readiness for change. The Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1984) outlines stages of behaviour change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Early Years practitioners can support children through these stages in a developmentally appropriate way. The COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) further explains that behaviour results from the interaction of capability, opportunity, and motivation. For example, a child's ability to participate in active play is affected not only by their physical development (capability) but also by the availability of safe play areas (opportunity) and encouragement from adults (motivation). Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), formerly known as CSSIW, oversees Early Years settings to ensure that providers adhere to national standards for promoting health, safety, and well-being. Estyn inspects how effectively educational and care settings encourage healthy lifestyles through their values and daily practices. Collaboration among various agencies, such as health visitors, educators, speech therapists, and social workers, is vital for ensuring that lifestyle interventions are holistic and tailored to each child's needs.



Figure 10: Children engaging in active outdoor play, supporting healthy physical development (Play Wales, 2021).



Figure 11: Visual guidance on sleep routines for early years children (NHS, 2023).

Conclusion:
Health, well-being, and lifestyle are crucial for a child's development during the early years. In Wales, policies such as Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales (Welsh Government, 2019) and the Play Policy (2002) support these initiatives through early intervention and a rights-based approach (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). Programs like Flying Start and guidance from NICE (2021) promote the establishment of healthy routines. Multi-agency collaboration, along with regulatory oversight by CIW and Estyn (2022), ensures consistent, high-quality support for children. Theoretical models, including the COM-B framework (Michie et al., 2011)

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