Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

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1005 Word count

Holding a deep conviction about the importance of humanity, the concept of the 'Hierarchy of Needs' was introduced by Abraham Harold Maslow (1943), a psychologist from the United States, which posits that there are two fundamental types of needs in humans ("Deficiency Needs" and "Growth Needs"). His theories were inspired by his family and the historical context of his life and have been influential across various fields, as they provide a framework for understanding how needs impact motivation and behaviour. This model, typically represented as a pyramid, proposes that individuals progress through levels of human needs, beginning with primary needs and moving toward higher-level psychological and self-fulfilment goals (Stoyanov, 2017).

The five levels of need described by Maslow offer a framework for understanding human motivation, outlining the progression from meeting basic survival needs to achieving self-actualization and personal growth (Maslow,1943).

The primary step is concerned with all mechanisms related to physical needs, which are the primary needs that must be met before moving on to more complex needs. Without meeting these needs, the body cannot function properly, and survival becomes impossible, as they represent the most fundamental layer of human existence. Biological imperatives, such as hunger pangs and extreme fatigue caused by deprivation of basic sustenance or rest, can cloud thoughts, making it nearly impossible to focus on higher-order psychological needs. For instance, the body signals distress when it is deprived of food or sleep, creating an urgency that demands immediate attention. Additionally, without adequate nutrition or hydration, cognitive functioning and emotional regulation suffer. Living in areas with limited access to resources can also make it difficult for individuals to meet their basic physiological needs (Maslow,1943).

The secondary step of Maslow's hierarchy is centred on creating a risk-free environment that ensures stability and protection from harm. People require stable environments where they feel secure, whether in their homes, workplaces, or communities. Safety needs are essential and include having shelter to protect against the weather, access to health services to prevent and treat illness, and protection from violence or accidents. Financial stability also plays a key role, allowing individuals to provide for themselves and their families, while healthcare access and insurance create a buffer against life's uncertainties. At a societal level, people need to trust that social systems will protect and serve them fairly, fostering a sense of stability in the community. For example, knowing one has a secure home, a safe neighborhood, and access to essential resources reduces stress and enables individuals to focus on personal growth (Taormina and Gao, 2013).

Source: OpenAI. (2024). *Infographic on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for Early Childhood Education.*

The intermediate stage of Maslow's hierarchy refers to affective connection and social inclusion, which are not just about having social relationships but about forming meaningful connections that offer effective insight, assistance, and a sense of community with others. Positive relationships can enhance resilience, reduce stress, and provide a foundation of trust and security that supports mental health. They help build self-confidence and reduce feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Feeling connected to a community reinforces a person's identity, purpose, and values, while close family relationships and committed partnerships offer unconditional support, trust, and acceptance. People seek spaces where they can express their true selves without judgment. Strong social connections contribute to overall psychological resilience, enabling people to face challenges with greater confidence and optimism. Once individuals fulfil their love and belonging needs, they establish a stable foundation for pursuing esteem and self-actualization (Stoyanov, 2017).

The penultimate stage of Maslow's hierarchy represents renown and a sense of success. These needs can be classified into two types: external necessity and internal necessity. External necessity relates to personal recognition and status, involving reaching your potential and accomplishing things that align with your values. In contrast, internal necessity is connected to empowerment, such as being recognized as a unique individual, cultivating respect from others, and feeling that you are making a meaningful contribution to the world. Meeting these needs helps individuals develop assurance in their abilities and capacity to overcome challenges. Addressing both external and internal needs is crucial in building self-worth and mental resilience. While external recognition offers brief moments of validation and internal fulfilment, feeling empowered, respected, and connected to one's purpose nurtures long-lasting personal growth. It contributes to deeper self-acceptance and psychological well-being, creating a foundation of confidence and emotional stability that helps individuals face challenges with greater strength over time (Pichère and Cadiat, 2015).

The top stage of Maslow's hierarchy is about reaching one's highest potential and realizing one's true capabilities. Having met the earlier needs, an individual can concentrate on pursuing their genuine passion. The journey toward personal achievement is unique for everyone, but it involves deep self-awareness, the courage to confront challenges, and the freedom to explore personal desires and aspirations. People who reach this stage often experience knowing they are living in harmony with their true selves. This alignment is a continuous process of development rather than a set condition, allowing people to approach life with a fresh sense of purpose, vitality, and resilience. It also empowers them to embrace their potential and handle problems with confidence and enthusiasm (Taormina and Gao, 2013).

One crucial idea to keep in mind when examining Maslow's hierarchy is that individuals can regress to any level at any time. People from different cultural backgrounds may prioritize their needs differently or may not even perceive them as hierarchical. For instance, within the structure of Maslow's needs pyramid, spirituality is frequently viewed as a contentious issue. Indeed, Maslow himself thought that a person's self-actualization could be significantly influenced by their sense of spiritual fulfilment and connection. He also viewed peak experiences as spiritually significant, contributing to social and emotional well-being. Nonetheless, in certain religious traditions, achieving one's spiritual goals and living per divine precepts are regarded as crucial to one's general growth and well-being and may even be more significant than the need for self-expression or personal success. Maslow's theory continues to be a fundamental framework for comprehending human motivation and has made a substantial contribution to disciplines like psychology, education, and management. Approaching the hierarchy with flexibility because human needs are complex, and each person's journey to personal fulfilment is different (Papaleontiou- Louca, Esmailnia and Thoma, 2023).

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ECEY4001/C
1005 Word count

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Source: OpenAI ChatGPT (2024). Infographic on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for Early Childhood Education [AI-generated image] ChatGPT response to Cristiane de Freitas, 13 November.

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The Concept of Holistic Child Development

Holistic development is an approach that fosters a child's overall growth and well-being, extending beyond academic or intellectual success. Every aspect of a child's development is crucial and contributes to their growth as a whole (Brodie, 2018).

This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and even spiritual development, which are crucial elements of holistic growth. Physical development is foundational from infancy through childhood, as children refine fine motor abilities (including handling a pencil) and gross motor skills (such as running and jumping). Emotional development involves children identifying, understanding, expressing, and managing their emotions, building emotional intelligence and resilience. Social development is centred on learning to interact socially, form relationships, collaborate, and become involved in community activities, which strengthens social skills. Cognitive development encompasses a child's ability to process information, think logically, understand cause and effect, and acquire new knowledge, fostering intellectual growth. Lastly, spiritual development pertains to a child's sense of purpose, connection with others, and understanding of life's meaning. While not necessarily religious, it can involve nurturing values such as gratitude, compassion, and respect (Brodie, 2018).

By focusing on all these interconnected areas, holistic development fosters balanced, well-rounded growth, supporting children to thrive not just in school but in all areas of life (Brodie, 2018).

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Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Bowlby's Attachment Theory are influential frameworks for understanding child development (Bronfenbrenner 1996; Maslow 1943; Bowlby 1988). These theories converge when examining how a child's environment influences their ability to meet their needs and develop holistically, promoting all aspects of their growth.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1996) observes how a child’s development is influenced by multiple interacting systems. These systems include the child’s surrounding context, such as family and school (the microsystem), as well as overarching contexts like the community and societal structures (the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). The wider social, cultural, and historical contexts in which a child lives are instrumental in their development alongside their immediate surroundings. These various layers of context shape a child’s growth over time (Hayes, Halpenny, and O’Toole, 2017).

For holistic development to occur, a child’s basic needs (physical needs, safety, and emotional security) must first be met, as outlined in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

Maslow’s (1943) theory, as well as Bronfenbrenner’s (1996) microsystem, emphasizes the importance of a child’s immediate environment in supporting these foundational needs, which must be satisfied before a child can progress to higher levels of development, including self-esteem and social connection.

Bowlby’s attachment theory (1988) highlights the significance of stable relationships during early childhood. Children who form trustworthy relationships with caregivers are more likely to explore their surroundings with confidence, feeling stable and secure. This trust supports their ability to manage stress and handle

challenges, laying the foundation for positive social interactions and emotional resilience. These secure attachments foster emotional stability and self-esteem, which are essential for healthy social interactions and coping with difficulties (Bowlby, 1988). This aligns with Maslow's idea that fulfilling emotional needs through supportive relationships directly contributes to self-esteem and overall well-being (Maslow, 1943).

Together, these theories illustrate the essential role of the environment, foundational needs, and secure relationships in nurturing a child's growth and supporting the journey toward self-actualization (Bronfenbrenner 1996; Maslow 1943; Bowlby 1988).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1996) shows that for self-actualization to be achievable, each system, from direct relationships to larger societal influences, must provide resources, opportunities, and a sense of security. The macrosystem, which encompasses societal values, influences the opportunities available to the child, such as access to education, creativity outlets, and emotional growth environments (Hayes, Halpenny, and O'Toole, 2017).

Self-actualization can, therefore, be viewed as a factor that advances through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), allowing the child to feel secure and valued enough to explore their identity, interests, and capabilities once their basic needs (such as physical, safety, and esteem needs) are met (Stoyanov, 2017). This process is further supported by the importance of secure attachment, as described in Bowlby's theory (1988). This secure base allows them to feel safe enough to explore their environment aligned with Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where direct relationships shape the child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). In this way, Bowlby's theory complements both Maslow's and Bronfenbrenner's frameworks by showing how secure relationships create the emotional stability required for the child's holistic development and journey toward reaching their full potential (Sadownik, 2023).

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However, the concept of self-actualization, as proposed by Maslow, has its limitations, particularly when applied to real-world contexts where the hierarchical structure of needs does not always align with the nonlinear nature of human development (Compton, 2024). Maslow's (1943) theory assumes a fixed, linear progression, where individuals must address primary needs before progressing to more advanced ones, culminating in self-actualization. Yet, in practice, human development is far more complex, with needs often overlapping or fluctuating based on external factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural values, and individual experiences (Hayes, Halpenny and O'Toole, 2017).

Furthermore, Maslow's assumption that self-actualization is a universal objective of human development may be criticized for overlooking individual and cultural variations in what constitutes fulfilment. For instance, the pursuit of personal self-actualization may be less significant in many non-Western cultures compared to individualistic Western societies. Instead of focusing on personal achievement, people in collectivist cultures may find fulfilment in their contributions to family, community, or society (Compton, 2024).

In practical scenarios, a child's development is rarely linear, particularly when unmet needs or limited access to resources and opportunities create obstacles. Building upon this understanding, Maslow's theory, while useful for understanding developmental needs, may overlook these complexities, as children often experience overlapping needs that cannot be compartmentalized into a strict hierarchy (Compton, 2024).

Bronfenbrenner's model enriches this perspective by illustrating how broader societal and cultural contexts shape access to essential resources and opportunities. Without these, children may face obstacles to their social,

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cognitive and emotional development, which could hinder their progression toward self-actualization (Sadownik, 2023).

Rather than following a fixed, linear progression, self-actualization may emerge through complex and non-linear paths influenced by secure relationships, immediate environmental support, and broader societal contexts. Collectively, these insights suggest that self-actualization is not a fixed endpoint but a flexible, evolving process shaped by unique developmental pathways. This challenges Maslow's one-size-fits-all approach by emphasizing that self-actualization is a dynamic process influenced by both contextual and personal factors rather than being an ultimate goal for everyone (Compton, 2024).

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Maslow's Theory in Early Years Practice

A common assertion is that transition, attachment, and physical development are fundamental components of early years practice, significantly influencing children's overall growth and education. Grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and aligned with the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2015), these approaches provide holistic support to foster children's lifelong development and success.

Transitions:

Transitions are any change that has the potential to disrupt the patterns or habits that children, and occasionally adults, are accustomed to (Allingham, 2011).
Transitions can be classified into vertical transitions (such as moving from one level of education to another or learning environment to another), horizontal transitions (such as changes in the routines of responsible adults dropping off or picking up the child) or education-associated transitions (such as curriculum changes or shifts teaching methods may impact children's learning) (Wilson, 2016).

For example, a child who has been transitioning into reception for about four weeks may still struggle to adjust to longer periods of structured learning. The child might find it difficult to sit still during carpet time, which affects their focus and disrupts their ability to engage in activities such as phonics or numeracy sessions.

The challenge in adapting to structured learning periods often arises from the child's unmet needs for stability and predictability, as outlined by Maslow (1943). His theory emphasizes the essential role of safety and security (the second level in the hierarchy) in fostering attention and active participation. When children do not feel safe, reassured, or supported in their new setting, engaging in learning through play or developing social skills becomes difficult (Stoyanov, 2017).

In this illustration, teachers, practitioners, and parents must recognize how changes influence each child individually, considering that many children come from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Practitioners can utilize the Curriculum for Wales

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(Welsh Government, 2015), which emphasizes well-being and developmentally appropriate strategies to support a smoother transition (Allingham, 2011).

Parental involvement and support are critical during transitions, highlighting the importance of practitioners communicating with parents to understand specific needs or effective strategies used at home, such as techniques for helping the child focus or encouraging them to sit still. Additionally, visual cues can guide sitting time, and interactive elements like stories or songs make carpet time engaging (Dockett and Perry, 2016). The significance of handling transitions in the early years with care helps establish a foundation for children to approach future transitions throughout their lives with confidence and positivity. Birth To 5 Matters (no date).

Attachment:

A child with a background of positive, trusting relationships presents a different challenge for caregivers compared to a child with a history of insecure or less trusting relationships. Children who anticipate difficulty in trusting new caregivers may display behaviors that hinder connection, testing the practitioner's ability to manage emotions and engage effectively (Sanders and Wishard Guerra, 2016).

For example, a three-year-old child who was recently placed in foster care due to family difficulties may struggle to form secure attachments with the staff. Although they have been attending nursery for a few weeks, they may be hesitant to participate in group activities, often withdrawing from peers and displaying intense emotional responses, such as crying or frustration.

This approach connects to Maslow's (1943) theory, which emphasizes the importance of meeting children's needs for belonging. Ensuring that children feel emotionally secure, valued, and included is pivotal for their growth and success in both educational and social contexts (Stoyanov, 2017). The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) reflects this understanding by placing a strong emphasis on health, well-being, relationship-building, and holistic development, ensuring that the child's integration into the nursery is as fluid and supportive as possible. This aligns with the fifth level of the developmental pathways (well-being), which stresses that secure attachments boost confidence, resilience, and independence, enabling children to engage more fully in daily activities (Welsh Government, 2022).

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Understanding the formation of attachments and their impact on emotional development is crucial for providing effective support to children facing social and emotional challenges in school. Practitioners must create accessible and inclusive environments that celebrate and value every child. Promoting a sense of security, especially during transitions, changes in routine, and visits from guests, is vital (Golding, 2013). Key strategies include facilitating small group play, cooperative tasks, guided emotional expression, and offering children a say in the activities and play they engage in. These approaches facilitate the development of a strong sense of inclusion. For these children, it is not only about offering relationships but also guiding them in utilizing and benefiting from these relationships (Lindon, 2012).

Physical Development:

Young children enhance their ability to practice and develop physical skills over time. However, physical development is deeply interconnected with all aspects of their development. Physical activity not only supports physical health but also fosters a sense of belonging and well-being, as movement is closely linked to cognitive and emotional development (Lindon, 2012).

For instance, a five-year-old child who is naturally energetic thrives when given opportunities for physical activity. When there are not enough opportunities for outdoor play, the child struggles to focus and becomes restless or agitated.

Maslow (1943) highlights that when a child's basic physiological needs, such as physical activity, are not adequately supported, it becomes difficult for them to progress to more advanced stages of development. Physical activity acts as a key building block, supporting not only physical well-being but also emotional stability, concentration, and preparedness for learning (Stoyanov, 2017).

The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) recognizes the significance of physical activity by emphasizing outdoor play as a means to encourage exploration, skill development, and holistic growth. Outdoor environments provide opportunities for children to enhance their focus, motivation, and memory while supporting the healthy development of bones and muscles.

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Practitioners have a significant impact in supporting children's physical needs in early years settings. For example, they can integrate physical movement into academic tasks, such as hopping while counting numbers or engaging in scavenger hunts to identify shapes and colors. Providing materials, including balls, climbing frames, and hoops, encourages free movement and exploration, while organizing outdoor activities such as obstacle courses and nature walks helps children develop their coordination and motor skills. Initiatives typified by Forest Schools further enhance outdoor learning opportunities, creating a supportive, activity-rich environment where practitioners ensure that children feel energized, engaged, and prepared to learn (Lindon, 2012).

In summary, transitions, attachment, and physical development are interconnected components that significantly influence children’s growth during the early years. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) underpins how practitioners ensure children’s basic needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem are met, forming a foundation for their potential to flourish. By addressing these needs, early years practitioners create environments that foster emotional security, social engagement, and readiness to learn. Aligned with the policy-driven principles of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2015, 2022), these strategies promote holistic well-being, helping children develop as confident, capable, and resilient learners who thrive in education and beyond.

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