

Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyles ECEY5009

I confirm that I have not used AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in the evidence.

Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyles

Introduction

Health, wellbeing, and lifestyles are fundamental concepts within early childhood education because they significantly influence children's development, learning, and future life opportunities. These three concepts are closely interconnected and continuously influence one another throughout the development of children. Children's experiences during the early years establish foundations for physical health, emotional wellbeing, and social competence throughout life. Sir Michael Marmot (2010) emphasises the importance of early childhood, arguing that "the foundations for virtually every aspect of human development physical, intellectual and emotional are laid in early childhood and what happens during these early years has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing from obesity, heart disease and mental health, to educational achievement and economical status". Consequently, promoting positive health and wellbeing during childhood should be a priority for families, practitioners, communities, and governments. Early years practitioners (EYPs) play a vital role in supporting children's health and wellbeing during the development of nurturing environments, positive relationships, and meaningful learning experiences. Understanding the complex factors that influence children's health enables practitioners to provide holistic support and improve outcomes for children.

What Is Health?

Health is not a straightforward concept and can mean different things to different people. How health is understood is often influenced by personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and professional perspectives, meaning there is no single way of defining it.

The World Health Organisation (2025) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." This definition is significant because it moves beyond traditional medical understandings of health and recognises the importance of emotional wellbeing, social relationships, and quality of life. The World Health Organisation also states that the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental human right and that the "healthy development of the child is a basic importance; the ability to live harmoniously in a changing total environment is essential to such development" (WHO, 2025). This highlights the importance of supporting children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development from an early age. It also emphasises that health is not simply about preventing illness, but about enabling children to participate fully in the world around them. Therefore, promoting positive health in early childhood is essential for laying the foundations for lifelong wellbeing and successful development.

Musgrave (2017) states that "health can be viewed from both negative and positive perspectives", with the negative perspective defining health as an absence of illness and disease. This approach reflects the 'Medical Model of Health', which focuses primarily on diagnosis, treatment and prevention of illness (Mason and Rieser, 1994). Although valuable, this model often overlooks social and environmental influences on health.

In contrast, Musgrave (2017) argues that the positive perspective views health as more simply the absence of illness. Health and wellbeing can instead be understood as the achievement and maintenance of physical fitness, emotional wellbeing and social functioning. This approach emphasises quality of life, emotional wellbeing and the ability to reach one's full potential. It aligns closely with holistic approaches to health by recognising that physical, emotional and social factors contribute to overall wellbeing.

A holistic understanding of health therefore recognises the interaction between the different factors that support children's development. It is understood that children's health cannot be understood solely through physical measures because mental health, relationships, environments and experiences all contribute to the idea of 'health'. This perspective aligns with the 'Social Model of Health', which argues that health is influenced by social and environmental and economic factors rather than being determined exclusively by illness (Mason and Rieser, 1994). In contrast to the 'Medical Model of Health', which focuses on diagnosing and treating disease, the 'Social Model' emphasises the importance of removing barriers and creating supportive environments that enable individuals to achieve positive health and wellbeing. For children this means recognising the roles of families, communities and access to services which can shape healthy outcomes.

Holistic Health

Health is often described as a holistic concept because it is influenced by a combination of physical, emotional, intellectual and environmental factors. Holistic healthcare provides a comprehensive and individualised approach to health that considers patients' physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being (British Holistic Medical Association, 2021). This perspective acknowledges that good health is achieved through balance across multiple dimensions of life rather than simply treating illness when it occurs.

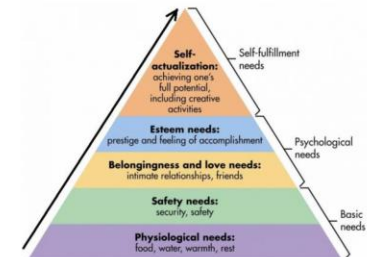
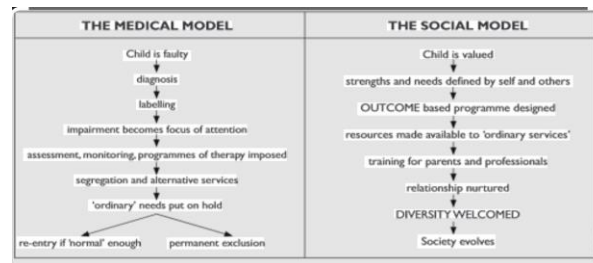
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) also reflects a holistic understanding of health. Article 24 states that "every child has the right to the best possible health and governments must provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment and education on health and wellbeing so children can stay healthy". This demonstrates that children's health is influenced by a wide range of social and environmental factors, not just medical care.

The Health Hexagon model further supports a holistic approach to healthy living. The model suggests that health is made up of six interconnected elements such as 'sleep, nature, exercise, diet, relationships and meaning' (Chan and Hazan, 2022). Each of these dimensions contribute to children's overall wellbeing and development. For example, positive relationships support emotional wellbeing, while access to nature and regular exercise can improve both physical and mental health. This reflects contemporary understandings of health as a dynamic and multifaceted concept, highlighting the need for early years practitioners to consider the whole child and the wider contexts that influence their development.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) suggests that children must have their basic physiological needs met before transitioning to the higher levels of development. Food, water, sleep and safety form Maslow's idea of the foundation of wellbeing. Positive relationships promote belonging and emotional security, while opportunities for achievement support self-esteem and confidence. When these needs are met, children are more likely to experience positive mental health, wellbeing and reach their full potential. Maslow's theory reinforces the importance of a holistic approach to children's health, wellbeing, and development.

The Health Hexagon Model



What is Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a complex concept that is used across a range of disciplines to describe an individual's overall state of health, happiness and wellness (Bautista et al., 2023). The National Health Service defines wellbeing as a holistic concept as it does not simply focus on the absence of illness but the experience of positive emotions, people's perceptions and life satisfaction (NHS England, 2022). This is further amplified by Statham and Chase (2010) who emphasise that we should focus on the immediate lives of children but also consider their future lives.

Research by Thoilliez (2011), found that children's happiness is strongly connected to relationships with others. Children frequently describe their happiness in terms of spending quality time with family, friends and trusted adults, highlighting the importance of belonging, connection and positive relationships in supporting wellbeing. Similarly, Berlinki and Schady (2015) emphasise that children's wellbeing is shaped by a combination of family relationships, education, health and wider social policies, demonstrating that wellbeing extends beyond individual experiences and is influenced by broader environmental factors.

Two key perspectives underpin wellbeing; hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Hedonic wellbeing focuses on happiness, pleasure and life satisfaction, whereas Eudaimonic focuses on meaning, personal growth and achieving potential. Ryan and Deci (2001) argue that both perspectives are important for understanding overall wellbeing.

Roberts' (2010) 'ABC Model of Wellbeing' identifies three key components; agency, belonging and communication. Agency refers to children's ability to make choices and influence their own lives. Belonging focuses on identity, inclusion, relationships, and communication enables children to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Physical wellbeing underpins all the aspects of the model.

Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Model further highlights the importance of autonomy, positive relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life and environmental mastery. Howard, Burton and Levermore (2020) argue that supporting children's mental health and emotional wellbeing requires a whole-school and whole-setting approach in which positive relationships, inclusion and emotional support are embedded throughout practice. Together, these models demonstrate that wellbeing is a complex and multidimensional concept that is influenced by relationships, environments and opportunities for personal development.

Lifestyles and Health

"Lifestyle is a complex and multifaceted term, and it is defined in various scientific studies in different ways" (Brivio et al., 2023). Lifestyle refers to the everyday choices, routines and environmental influences that affect a person's overall health and wellbeing. For children, aspects such as nutrition, physical activity, quality of sleep, and social relationships play an important role in shaping their growth and development in the long term. ESTYN (2017) promote high-quality lifestyles for children through their ability to provide healthy eating and drinking, physical exercise, safety, hygiene, and environment-related issues. Thomas and Lewis (2016) further suggest that developing healthy habits, positive ways of thinking and being motivated are key actions to maintain healthy lifestyles. Children's lifestyle choices are often shaped by the guardians and communities surrounding them rather than the individual's choice alone which further emphasises the key importance of early years practitioners and wider social influences to ensure children have access to healthy living and wellbeing.

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory

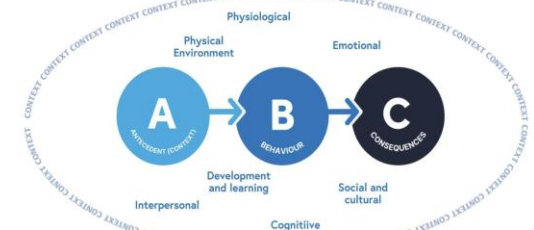
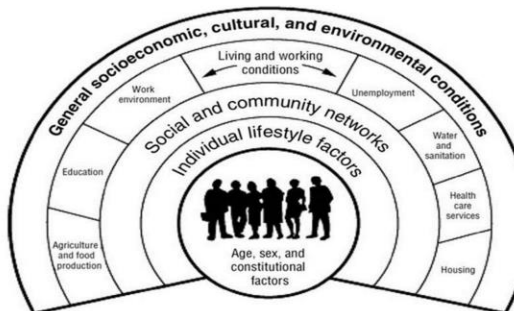
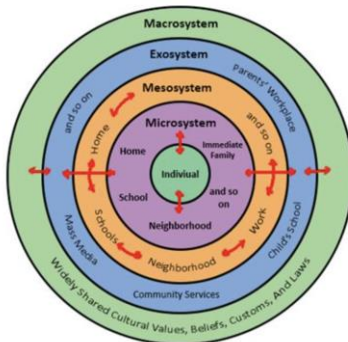
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory highlights how children's health and wellbeing are influenced by interconnected systems. The microsystem includes immediate environments such as family and school, while the mesosystem focuses on interactions between these environments. The exosystem includes wider influences such as local services, community support and parental employment, whereas the macrosystem encompasses cultural values, legislation and government policies. The chronosystem recognises how historical and societal changes influence children's lives over time. This theory demonstrates that children's health outcomes are shaped by relationships, communities and broader social contexts (Flynn and Mathias, 2025).

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Dahlgren and Whitehead Rainbow Model

The Dahlgren and Whitehead Rainbow Model demonstrates how health is influenced by multiple layers of factors, including individual lifestyle choices, social and community networks, living and working conditions and wider socio-economic, cultural and environmental influences (Whitehead and Dahlgren, 1991). The model highlights that children's health and wellbeing are shaped not only by personal behaviours but also by the social determinants of health, such as housing, education, income, employment and access to healthcare. These wider influences can have a significant impact on health outcomes and contribute to health inequalities. Understanding these factors is essential when considering how to improve children's health and wellbeing and reduce disparities within society (Public Health England, 2017).



Poverty and Inequalities

Marmot (2010) argues that health inequalities begin early in life and are closely linked to social disadvantage. Child poverty remains a significant issue in Wales, affecting children's physical health, educational wellbeing. In 2015, the BBC reported that 23% of people in Wales were living in poverty (BBC, 2015). More recent data continues to show high levels of child poverty across many Welsh local authorities, it is shown that almost 30% of children in the UK are facing poverty, highlighting the ongoing nature of the issue (Stone, 2023). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) found that poverty in Wales is associated with poorer health outcomes, lower educational achievement and reduced opportunities later in life. UNICEF (2024) emphasises that poverty can be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of children as limited access to healthcare, nutritious food, safe housing and quality education can negatively impact healthy development and lifestyles. Schmeer and Yoon (2016) further emphasise that there is a significant impact on the health of children due to the standards of their housing conditions, overcrowding and stressful home environments which can negatively affect children's health, sleep and wellbeing. These findings demonstrate how social and economic inequalities can create unequal health outcomes and reinforce the importance of early intervention, poverty reduction strategies and access to support services.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of holistic health and wellbeing. The Health Hexagon Model demonstrates that emotional wellbeing is closely connected to sleep, relationships, exercise, diet and meaning (Chan and Hazan, 2022). Positive mental health enables children to form relationships, regulate emotions and engage successfully in learning (World Health Organisation, 2024). Protective factors include secure attachments, supportive relationships, positive self-esteem and opportunities for play and participation. Risk factors may include poverty, social isolation, family stress and adverse childhood experiences. This has been shown through the need for early intervention, prevention and collaborative action across all sectors (Public Health Wales, 2025). Resilience refers to a child's ability to cope with difficulties, overcome setbacks and respond positively to challenging situations. The development of resilience is shaped by the support available to children through their relationships and environments, including strong connections with family members, friends, educators and other trusted adults (Masten and Barnes, 2018). The Anna Freud Centre (2019) highlights the importance of measuring and supporting wellbeing in early years settings through nurturing relationships, emotional development, and responsive practice. These factors demonstrate that promoting children's mental health requires a holistic approach that strengthens protective factors, build resilience and provides supportive environments in which children can thrive.

Conclusion

Children's health, wellbeing, and lifestyles are shaped by a combination of individual, social, and environmental influences. Models such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the Dahlgren and Whitehead Rainbow Model highlight the importance of considering the wider factors that affect children's lives. Through inclusive, child centred and holistic practice, early years practitioner can help create positive experiences that promote healthy development, emotional wellbeing, and lifelong opportunities for success.

Supporting Health and Wellbeing in Early Years

The Curriculum for Wales identifies health and wellbeing as one of six 'Areas of Learning and Experience' (AoLEs) aiming to develop healthy, confident individuals. In early years practice, wellbeing is supported through an emergent curriculum where practitioners observe, notice and respond to children's needs and interests. Approaches such as Reggio Emilia and Montessori promote enabling environments that encourage independence, exploration and belonging. The Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scales help practitioners assess engagement and emotional wellbeing (Moorhouse, 2024). Play-based learning is also essential, supporting confidence, resilience, relationships and emotional development while promoting children's overall health and wellbeing.

Multi-Agency Partners

- Health Visitors
- Schools
- Flying Start
- CAMHS
- Social Services
- Family Support Services



2 Ryff's model of wellbeing



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