

# Time to join



Linda Baston-Pitt and Jane Brotchie argue that success for your setting, the children, their families and your staff is predicated on wellbeing



Cast back to a time when you experienced a sense of wellbeing. What was happening? What did it look like? Ask 10 people this question and you'll get 10 different answers. Wellbeing is when we feel good and feel that our lives are going well. So, it's not surprising that we all have a different idea of what it means in practice.

This can be problematic when introducing wellbeing into our setting. Is it providing fruit at staff meetings and yoga classes for children or is it perhaps about flexible parental leave and simply being kind to each other? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Focusing on single issues is a bolt-on approach, while a sustainable approach means thinking holistically – bringing together policy, leadership, curriculum, environment, staff welfare, partnerships and children's own voices.

Achieving this whole-setting approach requires an understanding of what wellbeing means, why it's

important for staff and children and, crucially, how we can achieve it. Only then can our sector talk with one voice and really make strides towards ensuring that wellbeing objectives are the norm and inform all our work.

## Why care about wellbeing?

We might choose to improve wellbeing simply because it's the right thing to do. Who wouldn't want children and staff to be happy and flourishing? But the case for improving wellbeing is more pressing than this. Scientific evidence indicates that subjective wellbeing has a wide-ranging impact: high levels of self-reported wellbeing help people to function better and predict better health, productivity and income, and a longer life.

These positive future outcomes make the case for early intervention for under-fives even more compelling, for their bodies and brains are still developing, as Public Health England recognises:

'The foundations of good physical and mental health, healthy relationships and educational achievement are laid in pre-conception through to pregnancy and the early years of life, which is when many inequalities in health often begin. Investment in the early years has been shown to offer good value for money, delivering significant impacts on social and emotional health and wellbeing and reducing

inequalities.' (Public Health England, 2019)

Governments and policy-makers, too, are starting to take notice. For example, The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) makes health and wellbeing a prerequisite for all other policies. Physical activity and healthy nutrition are embedded in the early years curricula right across the UK, and, in Scotland, children's health and wellbeing is designated a shared responsibility for all early years staff. Ofsted have also positioned health and wellbeing as key indicators of quality early years care for both children and staff in the new Education Inspection Framework:

## What is wellbeing?

At PurpleBee, we describe wellbeing as 'feeling good and doing well'.

Feeling good is when we have a positive experience of life. We feel engaged, curious and open to new experiences. We are happy and experience pleasure, enjoyment and contentment.

Doing well is how we function in, and engage with, the world: experiencing positive relationships, having a sense of purpose and meaning in what we do and a sense of control over what happens to us.

A thriving early years setting is one where both staff and children feel good and are able to do well. Flourishing staff know their strengths, are self-aware and



# the dots

'Practitioners provide a healthy diet and a range of opportunities for physically active play, both inside and outdoors. They give clear and consistent messages to children that support healthy choices around food, rest, exercise and screen time.'	'Staff consistently report high levels of support for well-being issues.'
'Practitioners teach children to take appropriate risks and challenge as they play and learn both inside and outdoors, particularly supporting them to develop physical and emotional health.'	'Leaders engage with their staff and are aware of the main pressures on them. They are realistic and constructive in the way they manage staff, including their workload.'

resilient. It's a virtuous circle: flourishing staff teams are linked to better outcomes for children, better career progression, recruitment and retention, and a happier environment for everyone.

## Health through a wellbeing lens

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. Seen through this lens, health isn't just about treatment, hospitals and healthcare. It's an optimum state that enables people to feel good and do well in three domains of wellbeing:

- physical wellbeing
- social wellbeing
- mental wellbeing.

Wellbeing in the workplace is often associated with just one of these – mental health – thus, conflating wellbeing with mental health or, more often, mental ill-health. At PurpleBee, we are working with settings to promote a holistic approach that promotes all three domains for staff and children: physical, social and mental wellbeing.

There are many examples of best practice in our sector. A number of years ago, Portico Nurseries introduced a physical activity and nutrition co-ordinator (PANCo) for all eight of their nurseries. They are incredibly proactive and have

worked hard together to develop a whole-setting approach to health and wellbeing for everyone including families.

As a way of embedding a culture of healthy food and eating, June Sullivan, CEO of LEYF nurseries, developed the new Food Procurement and Cooking for Early Years Level 2, accredited by Cache, to help chefs cook specifically for children: procuring the right foods, getting portions right and presenting in the right way. This led to the recent launch of their Chef Academy in London.

## Health: whose responsibility?

National guidelines provide a benchmark for physical activity and nutritional health, and we are in a prime position to educate and support children and families, but success depends on taking account of the complex factors that prompt people to change.

Our health, and the health of the children and families we work with, is governed by wide-ranging environmental, social and economic factors – housing, poverty, income,

education and, of course, early childhood development. All these influence the individual's and society's ability to flourish, and they all impact on the individual's ability to make changes to their health.

Settings that have a PANCo in place have a head start in managing this health-promoting approach: our online PANCo course equips staff with tools and strategies to analyse, plan and reflect, and learners also have access to a set of best-practice ideas to guide their change initiatives.

## Partnerships

The best way to understand the context in which our children and families are living is to forge strong links with our local communities and partnerships with parents. An example of this is in Cumbria where the county council is launching its Healthy Families Cumbria Pledge, a joint programme with Public Health and early years education and care to deliver measurable improvements in young children's health and wellbeing.

## Where to start?

'Rather than being something people just get at the doctor's or at hospital, health is something that starts in families, schools, communities and workplaces. It can be found in parks and in the air people breathe. (Health Foundation, 2018)

Viewing health through the lens of wellbeing frees us up to think about how we can enhance health in our own environments: how we manage our staff and relate to parents and families; and how we design the physical spaces across the setting so that children can have the best possible start in life. Every step you take towards bringing wellbeing into your setting is a step in the right direction. Just remember to join the dots! ■

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