

The Role of Parents in Providing Nutritious Food to Prevent Stunting in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of parents in providing nutritious food to prevent stunting in early childhood. Stunting, a condition caused by chronic malnutrition, affects children's growth, cognitive development, and overall health. Using a literature review method, this research analyzes findings from various scholarly sources to examine parental involvement in ensuring a balanced diet. The results highlight that parents, especially mothers, play a crucial role as educators, facilitators, and role models in children's nutrition. Providing a balanced diet rich in carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals, as well as promoting healthy eating habits, is essential in preventing stunting. Additionally, parents should actively monitor children's growth through posyandu (community health services) and engage in nutrition education programs. The study concludes that strong parental awareness and commitment significantly contribute to reducing stunting rates. Future research should focus on effective interventions and policies to enhance parental participation in early childhood nutrition.

Introduction

Children aged zero to eight years are generally classified as early childhood. This period is often referred to as the golden age, during which growth and development occur rapidly. At this stage, the role of parents is crucial in supporting children's growth and development to ensure optimal outcomes. According to Festi (2018), achieving optimal growth and development requires parents to consider several factors, one of the most important being providing nutritious food. The primary goal of nutritious food intake is to ensure that children grow up healthy, active, and intelligent.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, human development is shaped by interactions between actively developing individuals (children) and their closest social environment (Dharma, 2023). In this context, the family plays a fundamental role in a child's growth and development. As part of the microsystem, parents directly influence childcare and nutrition, which significantly impacts children's health and overall development. A supportive family environment, including a healthy diet and active participation in monitoring children's growth, contributes to preventing stunting and improving children's quality of life (Nordianiwati et al., 2024; Zaitun & Widya, 2024).

The family's role is crucial in achieving this objective. Families must promote health awareness by introducing nutritious food and implementing healthy lifestyle practices, ensuring that these behaviors

are adopted by all family members to create a healthy household (Saifah, 2019). Parents, in particular, play a vital role in providing nutritious food to children, as they are constantly present in the child's daily life (Audy & Nofianti, 2024). Additionally, parental knowledge and skills regarding nutrition are essential. Low parental awareness and lack of information about the importance of providing nutritious food often lead to nutritional deficiencies in children (Rusilanti et al., 2015). Furthermore, families with low economic status may struggle to access quality healthcare, which can negatively impact children's growth and development.

Ensuring adequate nutritional intake is essential for supporting physical growth, cognitive development, and intelligence enhancement (Koesmadi et al., 2019). Nutritious meals for children should be similar to those of adults, containing carbohydrates, fiber, minerals, vitamins, and water, tailored to the child's developmental stage. However, low parental knowledge and skills in preparing nutritious meals often result in children losing interest in eating due to unappealing food presentation or lack of variety. Many parents also opt for fast food without considering its nutritional value, often citing convenience as a reason (Leda et al., 2022). Lack of parental attention to children's nutritional intake can lead to malnutrition-related health problems.

Malnutrition can hinder children's growth and development. If left unaddressed, it can lead to stunting, a condition characterized by impaired growth and development due to chronic malnutrition and

repeated infections, marked by height below standard growth levels (WHO, in Majid et al., 2022). Stunting not only affects physical growth but also impacts early childhood development, especially during the first 1,000 days of life and beyond two years of age (Young et al., 2018). It can occur from the fetal stage until a child is two years old, primarily due to maternal nutritional deficiencies during pregnancy.

Stunting is a critical public health issue caused by long-term malnutrition and recurrent infections, resulting in children having lower-than-standard height for their age (WHO, in Majid et al., 2022). It requires urgent attention, as stunted children are more vulnerable to illness and experience disrupted physical and cognitive development (Rozana & Bantali, 2020). Additionally, children affected by stunting tend to have reduced cognitive abilities, which can impair their learning processes (Nofianti, 2020). This lack of cognitive development may lead to lower competitiveness in future generations.

Stunting remains a major issue affecting young children in Indonesia. In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) ranked Indonesia as the third-highest country in Southeast Asia for stunting prevalence, with a rate of 36.4%. According to the 2022 Indonesia Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI), the stunting rate among Indonesian children was 21.6%, down from 24.4% in 2021. The Indonesian Ministry of Health aims to further reduce the stunting rate to 19% by 2024.

Although the stunting rate in Indonesia has declined, it still exceeds WHO's standard, which sets a maximum threshold of 20% (1 in 5

children). Various factors contribute to stunting, including imbalanced nutrition, low birth weight history, previous illnesses, lack of access to clean water, poor sanitation, and inadequate parenting practices, particularly maternal awareness about stunting. Many parents underestimate the long-term consequences of stunting, failing to recognize its impact on children's future well-being. Childhood health conditions significantly influence overall development (Majid et al., 2022).

Methods

The method applied in this study is the literature review method, a type of research aimed at exploring, analyzing, and identifying information from various literature sources, such as reference books, reading materials, and previous research findings related to the research problem (Sari et al., 2023). The sources used in this study include books, journals, and other relevant readings that discuss the role of parents in providing nutritious food to prevent stunting in early childhood.

The data collection technique involved gathering qualitative data, which was then analyzed using an inductive approach. This approach involves collecting and analyzing data to develop a theoretical framework. The inductive process includes data collection, reading, and comprehension, followed by identifying keywords and key concepts, classifying data based on themes, formulating data models, and interpreting the analysis results.

Results and Discussions

Based on the findings from the literature review method, which involved collecting various references and analyzing relevant sources from eight journals, the study reveals that parents play a crucial role in providing nutritious food to prevent stunting in early childhood. The following section presents a review of several journal sources used in this research.

No	Author(s)	Title	Findings
1	Adolf Bastian, Suharni, and Sean Marta Efastri	<i>Peranan Orang tua dalam Pemenuhan Gizi dan Nutrisi sebagai Upaya Pencegahan Stunting</i>	The findings indicate that parents have played a relatively good role in fulfilling their children's nutritional needs. However, this role still needs to be enhanced, as some parents rarely take their children to posyandu (integrated health services) for nutritional check-ups, considering it unimportant. In reality, proper nutrition plays a crucial role in

			supporting children's growth and development from birth to the age of eight.
2	Hidayatu Munawaroh, Nafis Khoirun Nada, Akaat Hasjiandito, Vava Imam Agus Faisal, Heldanita, Irna Anjarsari, and Muhammad Fauziddin.	<i>Peranan Orang tua dalam pemenuhan Gizi Seimbang Sebagai Upaya Pencegahan Stunting Pada Anak Usia 4-5 Tahun</i>	The findings indicate that parents act as educators, managers, and facilitators in fulfilling children's nutritional needs, including nutritional education, meal planning, selecting high-quality food ingredients, and monitoring children's growth at posyandu. Additionally, school principals serve as motivators, facilitators, and evaluators in supporting balanced nutrition programs, such as PMT (Supplementary

			Feeding Program) and child development monitoring.
3	Ni Putu Widari, Erika Untari Dewi, and Eny Astuti	<i>Peningkatkan Peran Orang Tua Dalam Pemenuhan Gizi Sebagai Upaya Pencegahan Stunting Pada Balita</i>	The findings indicate that 98% of respondents have a good understanding of the concept of stunting, 85% possess good knowledge of nutrition, and 97% are well aware of family support in ensuring children's well-being. The role of the family, particularly mothers, is highly influential in maintaining balanced nutrition for toddlers.
4	Hozania Bellandira Cholana, Dian Miranda, and Halida.	<i>Peran Orang Tua Dalam Pemberian Makanan Bergizi Seimbang</i>	The findings indicate that parents act as companions in providing balanced nutrition for early childhood

		<p><i>Pada Anak Usia Dini</i></p>	<p>learners at TK Manusia, Nanga Taman District, by encouraging children to adopt healthy habits, such as washing hands before and after meals, drinking water regularly, and consuming a balanced diet including rice, vegetables, protein, and fruit. Parents also play a motivator role, giving positive reinforcement about healthy eating, planning varied meal menus, preparing nutritious lunchboxes, and allowing children to choose their food. Additionally, at TK Insani, Nanga Taman District, parents act as facilitators,</p>
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			ensuring that children receive adequate and balanced nutrition both at home and school.
5	Firna Nakhwa Firdaussi, Nabila Khaerunisa, and Siti Mumun Muniroh.	<i>Peran Orang Tua dalam Pemenuhan Gizi Seimbang Sebagai Upaya Pencegahan Stunting pada Anak Usia 4-5 Tahun di Desa Mayangan Kecamatan Wiradesa Kabupaten Pekalongan</i>	The findings indicate that parents play a crucial role in ensuring their children receive adequate nutrition. One key aspect of maintaining children's health is parental awareness of healthy and balanced diets and their involvement in meal preparation. The ability of parents to meet their children's nutritional needs is influenced by family support, access to food resources, financial conditions, and knowledge about essential nutrients

			required for preventing stunting in children aged 4-5 years. Additionally, parental height and occupation are also factors affecting children's nutritional needs.
6	Ellysia Eka Putri Agustina and Rizkya Dwijayanti	<i>Peran Orang Tua Dalam Pencegahan Stunting Melalui Program Sekolah Orang Tua Hebat Di Kelurahan Lakarsantri</i>	The findings indicate that efforts to prevent stunting in Lakarsantri Subdistrict include posyandu services, outreach programs, and education campaigns led by community health workers and local health centers (Puskesmas). The "Great Parent School" program educates the community on the importance of family involvement in child growth and development, increasing

			awareness about stunting prevention. The program also promotes supplementary feeding, providing eggs, bread, and milk to fulfill children's nutritional needs, while emphasizing proper parental involvement in ensuring children's nutrition, health, and age-appropriate stimulation.
7	Maulida Nur, Umalihatyati, Qonita, Novrita Tri Yulvia, Kurnia Ramadhani, Ratu Yustika Rini, Novita Sari, Moch Fikri Tanzil Mutaqin, Mutia Sari.	<i>Edukasi Makanan Sehat Dan Gizi Seimbang Untuk Mencegah Stunting Pada Anak</i>	The findings indicate a significant improvement in parental understanding of the importance of healthy and nutritious food for preventing stunting.

8	Sukmo Gunardi, Rd. Ratih Hanawidjaya, Finny Redjeki, and Asep Sudrajat.	<i>Peningkatan Pengetahuan Ibu Tentang Makanan Sehat Untuk Mencegah Stunting Pada Anak Usia Dini</i>	The findings indicate that practical skills training on preparing nutritious meals using local ingredients has been effective in raising mothers' awareness of their role in stunting prevention. The psychoeducation program helps mothers gain better knowledge of healthy eating habits, enabling them to incorporate proper nutrition into their children's daily diets, thus contributing to early stunting prevention.
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Based on the review of eight (8) journal articles, various parental roles have been identified in providing nutritious food to prevent stunting in early childhood. Children in the preschool age range (4-6 years) are in their golden age of growth and development. During this

phase, children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development occurs rapidly, requiring adequate stimulation and balanced nutrition. Active and healthy children who receive nutritious food are more likely to optimize their growth potential.

If a child experiences nutritional deficiencies, it can lead to learning difficulties, metabolic disorders, an increased risk of non-communicable diseases, and stunting. Stunting refers to a condition where a child suffers from chronic malnutrition, particularly during the first 1,000 days of life, which affects their physical growth, cognitive development, and immune system. Stunted children often exhibit lower height and weight compared to their peers.

Parents, as the closest family unit, play a vital role in ensuring optimal child growth and development. They actively contribute to health improvement by providing nutritious food, promoting clean and healthy lifestyles, and serving as role models for the entire family (Munawaroh et al., 2022). In this context, parents act as educators, organizers, and facilitators by selecting, purchasing, and preparing a variety of attractive meals while ensuring that children consume a balanced diet daily (Munawaroh et al., 2022). Proper nutrition in early childhood is crucial for ensuring optimal growth and development (Tantriati & Setiawan, 2023).

Providing varied, nutritious meals daily, tailored to the child's age and developmental stage, significantly enhances their growth and overall well-being (Azhima, 2021; Maulani, 2021). Nutritious food

should not only be provided at home, but parents should also monitor their children's school meals by preparing packed lunches to prevent unhealthy snacking and ensure adequate nutrition. Parents can decorate lunchboxes creatively to make meals more appealing to children. Occasionally, they should allow children to choose their preferred meals while limiting processed foods with unhealthy preservatives by educating them on their health risks. Additionally, parents should encourage healthy habits, such as washing hands before activities and drinking water before and after meals while explaining the importance of hydration (Cholana et al., 2023).

To prevent stunting, parents should monitor their child's growth by regularly attending posyandu (community health services) (Firdaussi et al., 2024) and participating in educational programs on stunting and child nutrition (Widari et al., 2021). Parental Roles in providing nutritious food to prevent stunting in early childhood:

1. Maternal Care During Pregnancy

Monitoring the mother's health during pregnancy is crucial in reducing the risk of stunting. Expectant mothers must maintain a nutritious diet daily to ensure the unborn child receives essential nutrients. Poor maternal nutrition and recurrent infections are direct causes of stunting in children (Hikmah et al., 2022).

2. Exclusive Breastfeeding (ASI)

Breast milk (ASI) is produced by the mother's mammary glands and contains essential nutrients for infants (Kamal et al., 2022). It serves as

the primary source of nutrition for newborns and is highly recommended for at least six months. This aligns with Islamic teachings, as mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:233):

"Mothers shall breastfeed their children for two full years."

3. Complementary Feeding (MPASI)

At six months of age, babies require complementary feeding (MPASI) to ensure continued nutritional adequacy. During this phase, mothers should adjust food texture, taste, and nutrient content according to the child's age and developmental stage. MPASI helps introduce children to various food flavors from an early age.

Mothers with adequate knowledge and skills in preparing healthy and nutritious food can significantly reduce the risk of stunting. Nutritious meals should be tailored to the child's specific needs, incorporating essential nutrients based on age-appropriate dietary requirements. Generally, nutritious meals for children resemble those consumed by adults, including rice, vegetables, and protein sources. Healthy foods should contain:

- a. Carbohydrates – The primary energy source for the body, commonly found in plants and animal-based foods.
- b. Fats – An alternative energy reserve when carbohydrate levels decrease. Fats are classified into plant-based fats (vegetable oils) and animal-based fats (dairy and meat products).
- c. Proteins – Essential for body-building and tissue formation. Proteins are categorized into plant-based proteins (legumes) and

animal-based proteins (meat, fish, eggs, dairy).

- d. Vitamins – Required for various metabolic functions and predominantly found in fruits and vegetables.
- e. Minerals and Water – Essential for body regulation and hydration.

This is consistent with the findings of Bastian et al. (2023), who state that early childhood requires five essential nutrients—carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals—to support growth, brain development, and immune system function to prevent stunting. Since no single food can provide all essential nutrients, it is vital to consume a variety of nutrient-rich foods in appropriate quantities and proportions.

Parents play a critical role in ensuring their children receive a balanced and nutritious diet to support optimal growth and prevent stunting. By understanding children's nutritional needs and adopting healthy eating habits from an early age, parents can help fulfill the necessary nutrient intake for physical growth, brain development, and immune function. Additionally, good dietary practices, such as meal variety, high-quality ingredients, and regular eating schedules, contribute to nutritional balance.

Furthermore, parental support in monitoring children's growth through posyandu and health services is essential for early detection of stunting risk. With strong commitment and awareness, parents can contribute to raising a healthier, smarter, and stunting-free generation

(Widya et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Based on the literature review presented in this study, it can be concluded that stunting is a nutritional deficiency problem that can occur in children aged 0-2 years and must be addressed promptly. One of the key factors contributing to stunting is the lack of parental involvement in providing nutritious food. Therefore, the role of parents, especially mothers, as primary caregivers is essential in preventing stunting.

One crucial role of mothers is ensuring that children receive adequate nutrition, including carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Additionally, mothers can promote clean and healthy living habits by encouraging children to wash their hands before and after meals. Furthermore, to monitor children's growth and development, mothers should actively participate in posyandu (community health services) or other healthcare programs. Active parental involvement is vital in reducing the risk of stunting in children, ensuring their optimal growth and development.

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