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EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND NUTRITION: UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE OF STUNTING AND HOW TO PREVENT IT

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Abstract

The most significant and valuable asset for society as a whole is health, and in order to recognize this state, proper dietary intake is required. Nutrition is a food ingredient that can improve a person's health when consumed. Thus, nutrition and health are closely linked. Early childhood nutrition preparation is a crucial issue that parents should focus on. because a child's early dietary intake will have an impact on their adult growth and development. Children's health and intelligence are directly linked to their nutrition, which cannot be separated. Additionally, children's growth and development will be supported by the nutrition they receive. This study aims to raise parents' and educators' understanding of the significance of a child's appropriate nutritional intake. A literature review of the findings and a discussion of research relevant to the program to be implemented constituting the research methodology. It is anticipated that this research will help parents and teachers at home by raising awareness of the need to monitor children's nutritional intake and sufficiency, which is also one of the key elements promoting growth and development.
Keywords : Early Childhood, Child stunting, Early childhood health and nutrition

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Abstract

The most important and valuable asset for society as a whole is health, and to recognize this condition, proper nutritional intake is necessary. Nutrition is a food ingredient that can improve a person's health when consumed. Thus, nutrition and health are closely related. Early childhood nutritional preparation is a crucial issue that must be a concern for parents, because children's nutritional intake from an early age will impact their growth and development as

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adults. Children's health and intelligence are directly related to nutrition and are inseparable. Furthermore, children's growth and development are also supported by the nutritional intake they receive. This study aims to increase parents' and educators' understanding of the importance of proper nutritional intake for children. A literature review of findings and discussion of research relevant to the program to be implemented constitutes the research methodology. It is hoped that this study can help parents and teachers at home by raising awareness of the need to monitor children's nutritional intake and adequacy, which is also a key element in promoting child growth and development.
Say Key : Early Childhood, Stunting in children, Health and nutrition of early childhood

1. INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a condition of stunted growth in early childhood, which can be caused by inadequate nutrition and stimulation. Data from the 2024 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) shows that the prevalence of stunting in Indonesia has decreased to 19.8%, exceeding the Bappenas target of 20.1%. The survey used a representative sampling method, involving 34,500 respondents.

Stunting not only affects height but also impacts a child's brain development and intelligence. Stunting becomes apparent when a child reaches 2 years of age because malnutrition can occur from birth. Preventing stunting should be a primary focus, especially during the First 1,000 Days of Life, from early pregnancy to 2 years of age. In preventing this problem, food selection and provision are key to preventing stunting in early childhood (Rokhmat et al., 2024) . When a child is 0-6 months old, nutritional intake from breast milk must meet their nutritional needs. Therefore, when children are 7-23 months old, they can receive complementary breast milk (MPASI). In addition to serving as an initial introduction to food for children, MPASI can also help meet children's nutritional needs that are not met by breast milk. Therefore, providing appropriate and nutritionally balanced MPASI should be a priority (Rostika et al., 2019) .

Malnutrition is a cause of stunting in children. This malnutrition occurs because the body does not receive sufficient nutrients, such as a lack of protein, vitamins, and fiber. Stunting can also be caused by economic factors, such as the child's age and the lack of exclusive breastfeeding (Rostika et al., 2019) . Consuming nutritious food is very important for children who are growing because their bodies are more likely to absorb the nutrients contained in the food they eat more easily. One impact that can occur in children with stunting is that they are at greater risk of developmental delays compared to children who do not experience stunting; for example, they tend to have a lower height and weight than children their age (Falmuariat et al., 2022) . One way to prevent stunting is to live a healthy lifestyle, especially maintaining environmental cleanliness, both externally and internally, such as diligently washing hands and maintaining the cleanliness of utensils used for eating and drinking (Hidajat, 2019) .

Nutritious food is food that can meet the body's nutritional needs (Wondal et al., 2023) . Many types of food can improve body nutrition and prevent stunting, such as fish, eggs, fruits, and vegetables. Consuming a balanced and nutritious diet is a way to meet the nutritional needs of every living being. It is crucial for children to consume these healthy foods from an early age or when they enter elementary school to ensure their physical growth and intellectual development, and to prevent infection (Rostika et al., 2019) .

From the numerous community service activities conducted to improve understanding of nutrition for preventing and reversing stunting, it can be concluded how crucial it is to provide insight and knowledge about healthy and nutritious food consumption to prevent stunting in growing children.

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2. METHOD STUDY

This study uses a qualitative method with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the research subject's experiences, including their behavior, thoughts, motivations, and actions. By using descriptive language and in a natural context (Moleong, 2014) . By using a literature study approach, collecting data from libraries, reading and making notes and organizing research materials are examples of this type of literature study research (Zed, 2008) . After collecting data from various sources such as books, journals, scientific articles, theses and libraries. After all is collected, data collection and processing of research materials will be carried out.

The research process begins with searching for and reading relevant sources to gain an initial understanding. Next, the researcher begins sorting data to be used as sources for the writing and thoroughly identifies journals, articles, books, and other sources that can be used as references. After data collection, a literature review framework is created and the results of the literature review are presented (Fauziah et al., 2023) .

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research conducted by researchers suggests that to help reduce stunting rates in Indonesia, the government and society must prioritize addressing the issue. Stunting is a worrying consequence of long-term malnutrition in children, which can lead to impaired linear growth and hinder overall child development (Pura & Asnawati, 2019) .

One way to determine whether a child is stunted is to conduct a comprehensive height assessment. This assessment is conducted using a number of widely recognized and predetermined benchmarks. It is widely recognized worldwide that stunting occurs in children if their length or height falls below -2 standard deviations from the median value established by the WHO Child Growth Standards for their age and sex (De Onis et al., 2013) .

Stunting has a significant impact on a child's growth and future; for example, it can hinder a child's physical and cognitive growth, thus impacting their schooling and potentially reducing their productivity. Stunting is largely caused by the low nutritional intake children receive from the food they eat. One symptom of stunting is delayed physical growth. However, stunting can also lead to health problems such as delayed cognitive development.

Children with stunting exhibit many symptoms, particularly slower growth compared to their peers. These children are often shorter than their peers in height, a result of chronic malnutrition. Stunted children often weigh less than their peers, a clear indicator of malnutrition. Stunting can also affect a child's pubertal development. Children with stunting may experience puberty later than their peers. This is because stunting hinders children's physical development, which in turn hinders their cognitive and physical development. Furthermore, the significant effects of stunting on children should not be overlooked. Stunting has negative effects, including reduced vitality and limited physical mobility, which hinders future achievement potential and overall well-being.

Preventing stunting is crucial, with a primary focus on encouraging exclusive breastfeeding and incorporating nutrient-rich foods or micronutrient supplements into children's diets. Because breast milk is rich in micro and macronutrients, it can help prevent stunting in children. Breast milk is a primary source of nutrition for babies because it contains high-quality protein and beneficial substances that help strengthen the immune system. Therefore, it is crucial for mothers to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months. This natural food is

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believed to boost the baby's immune system thanks to the colostrum and whey protein it contains.

Before embarking on their parenthood journey, prospective couples can improve their nutritional health by gaining the right knowledge and cultivating a positive mindset. Couples who understand the importance of stunting prevention can plan and implement targeted nutritional interventions. These efforts should begin during the mother's preconception period, as this can help prepare the child for the first 1,000 days of life.

Health check-ups like these also provide a valuable opportunity to plan healthier pregnancies and reduce the risks associated with stunting. Failure to address poor nutritional status can lead to low birth weight, which increases the risk of stunting. Pregnant women who suffer from chronic energy deficiency (CED) or anemia during pregnancy are more likely to give birth to low birth weight babies. Therefore, it is crucial to proactively address this issue by creating or enhancing policies that prioritize improved nutrition interventions and maternal health services, with a particular emphasis on young children.

The Indonesian government has designated stunting reduction as a national priority in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). This commitment is reflected in various cross-sectoral programs and policies aimed at improving the nutritional quality of the community, particularly pregnant women, toddlers, and adolescent girls. Within this framework, synergy between the health, education, social, and food security sectors is crucial. Specific interventions such as supplementary feeding and iron supplementation for pregnant women and toddlers must be combined with sensitive interventions such as improved sanitation, clean water provision, and nutrition education for the community. This multisectoral approach is crucial to ensure that all determinants of stunting are comprehensively addressed.

One crucial aspect of stunting prevention is the role of families in implementing healthy lifestyles. The family is the first environment that shapes children's eating behaviors and habits. Therefore, education about the importance of balanced nutrition, hygiene, and good parenting must be provided not only to mothers, but also to fathers and other family members. Raising family awareness of the importance of the First 1,000 Days of Life (HPK) can have a significant positive impact on child development. Community-based education programs involving health workers, community leaders, and local organizations can be an effective strategy for reaching families in various regions, including remote areas.

Adolescent girls, as prospective mothers, play a crucial role in the stunting prevention cycle. Adolescents with anemia, iron deficiency, or chronic energy deficiency are at high risk of giving birth to babies with low birth weight, a major risk factor for stunting. Therefore, providing iron supplements, increasing access to nutritious food, and reproductive health education are crucial in developing a healthy generation of mothers. The government and educational institutions need to strengthen school health programs with a holistic approach, including providing nutritious food in school canteens, providing supplements, and training students in healthy living skills.

Environmental factors also significantly influence children's nutritional status. Unhealthy environments, such as lack of access to clean water, poor sanitation, and crowded living conditions, can increase the risk of infections such as diarrhea and skin diseases, which in turn interfere with nutrient absorption. Therefore, basic infrastructure development programs, such as healthy toilets, clean water pipes, and proper waste disposal facilities, must be prioritized in stunting prevention efforts. Community-based total sanitation (CLTS) campaigns can also be used to foster clean and healthy living behaviors at the community level.

In the context of health services, Integrated Health Posts (Posyandu) and Community Health Centers (Puskesmas) play a crucial role as the spearheads of stunting prevention at the community level. Health workers must be equipped with adequate training to accurately monitor

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child growth, provide nutritional counseling to mothers, and refer high-risk cases in a timely manner. Service innovations such as digital monitoring systems, electronic KIA books, and nutrition teleconsultations also need to be developed to increase the effectiveness and reach of services. Improving the quality and availability of nutrition personnel at Community Health Centers (Puskesmas) is also a crucial element in stunting prevention strategies.

The availability and affordability of nutritious food is another crucial factor. In many areas, especially rural and remote areas, access to nutritious foods such as animal protein, fresh vegetables, and fruits remains very limited. Subsidies for nutritious food, subsidized food programs, and strengthening local food security through family farming, catfish farming, and small poultry farming can be solutions to ensure adequate nutrition for children. Collaboration between the government, NGOs, and the private sector in food security strengthening programs needs to be continuously improved.

In education, schools and early childhood education institutions (PAUD) must also be part of the solution to stunting prevention. Nutrition education must be incorporated into the curriculum as part of character building for children from an early age. Healthy school lunch programs, supplementary feeding in PAUD, and teacher training on the importance of nutrition and child growth have the potential to have a long-term impact on children's nutritional awareness and behavior. Teachers and other educational staff need to be actively involved as agents of change in preventing stunting.

The use of technology and social media in stunting prevention campaigns also holds significant potential. Digital campaigns involving influencers, community leaders, and engaging educational content can effectively reach young people and the wider community. Creating mobile apps that provide nutritional guidance, child growth calculators, and online consultations with nutritionists can also facilitate access to information for young parents. Social media should be used as a tool for community empowerment to build collective awareness of the importance of nutrition and child growth.

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation of stunting reduction programs must be conducted regularly and based on data. Child anthropometric data, maternal nutritional status, and environmental indicators must be collected, analyzed, and used as a basis for decision-making. An information technology-based reporting system can accelerate the tracking of stunting cases and provide more targeted intervention responses. Central and regional governments need to have a stunting monitoring dashboard that is transparent, accountable, and easily accessible to the public to encourage community participation.

Fiscal policies and regional budgets also need to be directed to support stunting reduction efforts. Local governments must allocate adequate budgets for nutrition programs, sanitation improvements, outreach, and capacity building for health workers. Strengthening local regulations and bylaws that support stunting prevention initiatives can provide a strong legal basis for program implementation. Incentives for villages that successfully reduce stunting rates can also motivate village officials and communities to be more active.

Community participation in preventing stunting is crucial, particularly through community service activities, community service, and community forums. Community empowerment through the formation of mother-to-toddler groups, community-based groups, and training of health cadres is strategic for disseminating information on nutrition and child care. Women's economic empowerment programs also have a dual effect, increasing family income and strengthening mothers' role in maintaining children's health.

Research and development in the field of nutrition and child health must also be continuously encouraged. Research institutions, universities, and study centers should be involved in assessing the effectiveness of nutrition interventions and identifying innovative

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approaches to stunting prevention. These research findings can inform the design of evidence-based policies and programs. Furthermore, international collaboration needs to be strengthened to learn from best practices from other countries that have successfully reduced stunting prevalence significantly.

Ultimately, stunting prevention is a long-term investment in Indonesia's human development. Children who grow up healthy, intelligent, and productive are the nation's greatest asset in achieving the demographic dividend and competing globally. Therefore, every stakeholder—government, community, business, academia, and the media—must unite in a national movement to accelerate stunting reduction. With commitment, the right strategy, and the active participation of all parties, Indonesia can create a golden generation free of stunting and full of potential.

4. CONCLUSION

Stunting is a disturbing manifestation of prolonged malnutrition in children, which hinders their overall growth and development. Some causes of stunting include insufficient nutritional intake from the child's diet, a lack of maternal education about stunting and failure to provide a balanced diet, infectious diseases suffered by the child, a lack of exclusive breastfeeding, and a limited amount of food available to the child. Stunting can be prevented through various methods, such as promoting exclusive breastfeeding, increasing public awareness about ways to socialize and educate about stunting prevention, and providing micronutrient supplements to pregnant women.

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