

The Role of Parents in Realizing Healthy Stunting-Free Children in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District

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Abstract

Stunting is a complex problem influenced by various factors. This study aims to understand the challenges in preventing stunting in the Sunggal sub-district, Medan Sunggal district. and explore potential solutions. Through a qualitative study, this study found that lack of parental knowledge, limited access to nutritious food, and poor environmental conditions were the main challenges. Community-based interventions, such as workshops and mentoring, can be effective solutions. However, stronger policy support is needed to address this problem comprehensively. This study concludes that stunting prevention requires a multisectoral and sustainable approach.

Keywords: Role of Parents, Stunting Prevention, Early Childhood

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Introduction

Stunting is a condition characterized by inadequate growth due to chronic malnutrition during the formative years of a child, especially in the first thousand days which has been critically emerged as a significant health crisis in Indonesia. According to a 2021 UNICEF report, the prevalence of stunting in Indonesia reached a worrying 24.4%, placing the country among the countries with the highest rates globally. This condition not only results in children being shorter than their peers but also has profound long-term consequences for cognitive development, overall health, and future productivity in adulthood. An important approach to combating stunting lies in empowering parents to provide their children with nutritious food and a growth-supporting environment. This is important, as the family serves as a major influence on a child's early development.

According to WHO data (2014), around 24.5% of children under five in the world are stunted. The main causes of stunting during the first 1000 days of life (HPK) are malnutrition and recurrent infections. As many as 80% of stunted children are in 14 countries, with 48% of cases found in Nigeria, Pakistan, China, and Indonesia. Of the 183 countries recorded, Indonesia occupies the fifth position with the highest number of stunted children. This condition shows the importance of the role of parents in preventing stunting. Developing countries like Indonesia face two main nutritional problems, namely undernutrition and overnutrition. The causative factors include poverty, food limitations, poor environmental quality, and low public knowledge about nutrition, balanced menus, and health (Rahmadhita, 2020). Stunting is a serious issue that can be a major threat to the future of the nation if not addressed (Efendy & Setiawan, 2021). Research by Effendy (Sahira & Assariah, 2023) shows that the stunting rate in Temanggung Regency is still high, reaching 20.25%. The local government is trying to reduce this number by improving the quality of various aspects of health.

Stunting, as defined by WHO (2014), refers to a child's height that is below two standard deviations from the median growth standard appropriate for his or her age. This condition is mainly a consequence of chronic malnutrition, which usually begins in the womb and continues into the early years of a child's life, especially until the age of two. According to Widya, R., Akbar, A., & Munisa, M. (2024). Diets that are deficient in essential nutrients such as protein, iron, and vitamin A are significant contributors to this problem. In addition, adverse environmental factors, including inadequate sanitation and recurrent infections, exacerbate the risk of stunting, which underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions.

In his important work, namely the Theory of Developmental Ecology, (Lesmana, G. 2022). UMSU Press. explain the various ways in which children shape the development of children through various layers of the environment, starting from the family as a basic and extended system to the structure of society and government policies. Within this framework, parents play an important role in meeting the basic needs of their children, especially in terms of nutrition and hygiene. Practices adopted by parents such as exclusive breastfeeding, offering nutritious complementary foods, and instilling healthy lifestyle habits are essential in stunting prevention. Furthermore, effective family sanitation practices, including regular hand washing with soap, access to clean water, and proper waste management, play an important role in fostering a healthy environment for children.

Although the government has made great efforts to reduce stunting rates through various initiatives such as integrated posyandu programs and the provision of supplementary food, significant challenges remain on the ground. The main concern lies in the limited awareness of parents, especially in rural and remote areas, regarding the nutritional needs of their children. Research conducted by Dini (2023) reveals a troubling relationship between low maternal education levels and a lack of understanding of the importance of providing nutritious food for children. Furthermore, economic limitations are a major obstacle to accessing healthy food options. Many families with limited budgets are forced to eat cheap but unnutritious foods, such as white rice without enough side dishes.

The environment has a significant impact on the alarming stunting rates we see today according to research (Supu, L., Florensia, W., & Paramita, I. S.2022). Inadequate sanitation, exemplified by the absence of proper toilet facilities and limited access to clean water, increases the risk of gastrointestinal infections in children, which ultimately hinders their ability to absorb essential nutrients. Case studies from remote areas in Indonesia reveal a troubling correlation: people with inadequate sanitation facilities experience significantly higher rates of stunting. These challenges are exacerbated by the absence of sustainable interventions that actively engage and empower communities in addressing these critical issues.

Recent research underscores the advantages of community-based strategies over discrete interventions. For example, a study conducted by Majid et al. (2024) in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) revealed that an integrated approach that includes nutrition education, improved sanitation, and community empowerment resulted in a remarkable 15% reduction in stunting prevalence in just two years. The initiative brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including health workers, community leaders, and local government representatives, to provide important education to parents on the importance of a nutritious diet and maintaining a clean environment. The findings of this study emphasize that addressing the problem of stunting requires a multifaceted approach, which integrates health initiatives with collaborative efforts across sectors.

In addition, technology is increasingly being used in efforts to combat stunting. Mobile apps, such as Elsimill developed by the National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN), empower parents in different regions to monitor their children's growth more effectively by providing important information about nutrition. However, the reach of this innovative tool is still limited, especially those that benefit urban areas equipped with reliable internet access. It is critical that we extend the availability of those resources to more remote communities, to ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive.

This study aims to explore the important role played by parents in realizing healthy stunting-free children in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District, and also in preventing stunted growth in early childhood by improving diet and environmental conditions. Through this investigation, we aim to produce empirical data that can inform and guide the formulation of practical policy recommendations. The urgency of this research is underscored by the profound long-term consequences of stunted growth on children's overall quality of life. Children with stunted growth are at high risk of cognitive delay, decreased immunity, and decreased economic productivity in adulthood. Therefore, preventing stunted growth is an important investment in fostering an extraordinary generation of human resources.

This study aims to explain the importance of the role of parents in realizing healthy stunting-free children in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District through a nutritious diet and a healthy environment in stunting prevention, especially for families. To address this problem comprehensively, collaboration between parents, the community, and the government is essential. By empowering parents in their roles, we can pave the way for a future filled with healthy and productive youth in Indonesia.

Literature Review 2.1. Stunting

According to the Ministry of Health (Kemenkes), stunting is a child with a score of less than -2SD/standard deviation (stunted) and less than -3SD (stunted). According to UNICEF, stunting is defined as the percentage of children aged 0 to 59 months with a height below minus (moderate and severe stunting) and minus three (chronic stunting) measured from the WHO child growth standards. WHO defines stunting as a growth disorder that describes the unattainability of growth potential as a result of non-optimal health or nutritional status (Fajarnita, A., & Herlitawati, H. 2023).

According to (Sefrina, L. R., & Elvandari, M. (2020). stated that stunting is the impact of various factors such as low birth weight, improper stimulation and parenting, lack of nutrient

intake and recurrent infections, and various other environmental factors. From some of the opinions above, the author concludes that stunting is a condition of failure in the development of children according to their age. Children who are stunting generally get shorter and have a weight according to their height, for example, a child has reached the age of 5 years but the height and weight are equivalent to a 3-year-old child.

The main cause of stunting is long-term (chronic) malnutrition. This lack of nutritional intake can occur since the baby is still in the womb because the mother does not meet the nutritional needs during pregnancy. In addition, children whose nutritional needs are not met during their growth and development period can also experience stunting. Stunting has the potential to slow down brain development, stunting has two impacts on children who suffer from it, namely short-term impacts and long-term impacts. The short-term impacts of stunting include: increasing the potential for illness and death in children, children's cognitive, motor, and verbal development becoming stunted and not optimal, and increasing health costs. Meanwhile, the long-term impacts of stunting include: low intelligence levels, and children's learning achievement becomes poor. Effective strategies have the potential to overcome the problem of high stunting rates.

2.2. The Role of Parents in Stunting Prevention

The role of parents in stunting prevention is crucial, because the family is the main environment in which children grow and develop. Parents have an important role to play in ensuring that children get adequate nutrition, good care, appropriate stimulation, and a clean and healthy environment to prevent stunting. We have made various efforts to prevent and deal with nutritional problems in the community. The incidence of stunting toddlers can be broken from the fetal in the womb by fulfilling the nutritional needs of pregnant women, meaning that every pregnant woman must get nutritious food, get nutritional supplementation (Fe tablets), and be monitored for health. In addition, every newborn only gets breast milk until the age of 6 months (exclusive) and after the age of 6 months is given complementary foods (complementary foods) that are in sufficient quantity and quality. Postpartum mothers, in addition to getting nutritious food, are also given nutritional supplements in the form of vitamin A capsules.

The incidence of stunting in toddlers that is chronic should be monitored and prevented if monitoring the growth of toddlers is carried out regularly and correctly. Monitoring the growth of toddlers in posyandu is a very strategic effort to detect the occurrence of growth disorders early, so that stunting can be prevented. (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). Some ways to prevent stunting include: (1) Preparing for a good marriage (2) Nutrition knowledge education (3) Supplementation for pregnant women (4) Supplementation for breastfeeding mothers (5) Micronutrient supplementation for toddlers (6) Encouraging increased children's outdoor activities.

2.3. Early Childhood

Early childhood is a vulnerable child at the age of 0-5 years (National Education System Law of 2003) and 0-5 years according to child education experts. According to Novianti, R., & Sahrul, M. (2020) early childhood is a group of children who are in a unique process of growth and development. They have a specific growth and development pattern according to their growth and development rate. At this time it should be noted that the period of very rapid child development is when children are 1-5 years old, often called "The Golden Age". The Golden Age was a golden age that was very sensitive to the environment and this period lasted very short and could not be repeated. During this critical period, the child's brain is more plastic. Brain plasticity in toddlers has positive and negative sides. On the positive side, toddlers' brains are more open to the learning process and enrichment. On the negative side, the brain of toddlers is more sensitive to unsupportive environments such as inadequate nutritional inputs

Zannatunnisya, Z., Widya, R., Ismaraidha, I., & Sasmita, I. (2024). Inadequate nutritional intake is caused by children eating difficulties in the form of reduced appetite related to increasing interaction with the environment. According to various studies in the field of neurology, it is proven that 50% of a child's intelligence is formed within the first 3 years. After the child is 5 years old, his brain development reaches 80% and at the age of 18 it reaches 100% (Utami, R. D. 2020).

In accordance with the 2003 National Education System Law article 1 paragraph 14, coaching efforts aimed at children aged 0 and 5 years are carried out through early childhood education. Early childhood education can be carried out through formal, non-formal and informal education. Early childhood education is formal in the form of kindergarten (TK), Raudatul Athfal (RA), and other equivalent forms. Early childhood education is in the form of non-formal pathways in the form of play groups (KB), childcare centers (TPA), while early childhood education in the informal education pathway is in the form of family education or education organized by the environment such as toddler family development and posyandu that are integrated with PAUD or what we know as similar PAUD units (SPS) (Parapat, A. 2020). From the description above, the author concludes that early childhood is a child in the age range of 0-5 years who is experiencing very rapid growth and development, so the right stimulation is needed to be able to grow and develop optimally. The provision of stimulation must be provided through the family environment, non-formal PAUD channels such as childcare centres (TPA) or play groups (KB) and formal PAUD channels such as kindergarten and RA.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology, which aims to investigate by improving nutritional and environmental factors. Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative research facilitates an in-depth exploration of phenomena within their natural environment, resulting in a richer understanding of individual experiences. The case study approach is very suitable for this investigation, because it focuses on certain incidents in the village of Sunggal District, Medan Sunggal District, which is particularly affected by the high stunting rate. According to Yin (2021), case studies allow researchers to conduct thorough analysis of issues in an authentic context, allowing for a nuanced examination of the challenges faced.

The research instruments used consisted of interviews and documentation. This in-depth interview is designed to investigate parents' perspectives, experiences, and practices regarding stunting prevention. As stated by Muslihin, H. Y., Loita, A., & Nurjanah, D. S. (2022), such interviews provide researchers with in-depth insights into the importance of participant experiences. In addition to interviews, we also made use of documentation, including posyandu records, health reports, and photographs depicting the family environment, to supplement the data collected. The research process began with the development of interview guidelines, which included questions focused on children's eating habits, sanitation practices, and parental awareness of stunting. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with a group of selected parents from the area in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District who have small children. The insights gained from these interviews are carefully transcribed to facilitate rigorous data analysis.

The data collected was then analyzed descriptively to explain the role of parents in realizing healthy stunting-free children in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District. This approach, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), includes three fundamental stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Initially, the researchers filtered out important information related to the focus of the study during the reduction phase. Furthermore, this refined data is compiled into a narrative format to uncover patterns, themes, and reciprocal relationships between variables. The final phase involves synthesizing these findings to answer research questions effectively. Through this methodical process, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how parents in the village foster a healthy diet and environment to combat stunting.

Results

According to Majid, Tharihk, and Zarkasyi (2022), stunting is a chronic growth disorder caused by malnutrition during the important period of child development, especially in the first 1,000 days of life. This period is crucial because it is a period of growth of the brain, organs, and immune system. Malnutrition at this stage can result in permanent disruption to children's health in the future (UNICEF, 2022). WHO (2023) identified several causes of stunting, including low access to nutritious food, lack of exclusive breastfeeding, recurrent infections such as diarrhea, and an environment that is not conducive to health. The Global Nutrition Report (2021) also emphasizes the importance of maternal education in family nutrition management, because mothers' low knowledge of nutritious food often makes children not get adequate nutritional intake.

Symptoms of stunting include height that is far below the average for a child's age, accompanied by signs such as impaired motor development, low appetite, and an increased risk of infection. Children who are stunted tend to have lower intelligence levels compared to children who grow normally, which can affect their productivity in the future (Black et al., 2022). According to Indah (2020) research, the long-term impact of stunting is very serious, including limited learning abilities, increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, and decreased economic potential due to low work productivity in adulthood. Therefore, stunting prevention is not only important for individuals, but also for the economic progress of a country. An optimal diet for early childhood should include foods rich in macronutrients and micronutrients. Animal protein from sources such as eggs, fish, meat, and milk is essential to support the growth of children's bones and muscles (Springmann et al., 2022). Additionally, plant-based foods such as green vegetables and legumes provide fiber and vitamins that help strengthen the immune system. Complementary foods (complementary foods) should be given at the age of six months with nutritional content that includes carbohydrates, proteins, healthy fats, and micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, and zinc. Research by Hardinsyah et al. (2023) shows that complementary foods made from local foods, such as sweet potatoes, tempeh, and catfish, significantly improve children's nutritional status, especially in rural areas.

In the Sunggal Village area, Medan Sunggal District, access to nutritious food is often limited due to economic constraints or lack of parental knowledge. Education on the use of local resources, such as fresh milk and vegetables, can help improve the fulfillment of children's nutritional needs. However, there are also families with adequate economic conditions, but children are reluctant to consume the vegetables or fruits provided. Providing a variety of foods in a child's diet can help prevent nutrient deficiencies, which are often one of the main causes of stunting. In addition to diet, environmental factors also contribute to the occurrence of stunting.

The environment, both physical and social, has a significant role in influencing stunting risk. According to research by Achmad, Hasdiansyah, and Ashadi (2024), the physical environment includes the availability of clean water, sanitation facilities, and healthy household conditions. Meanwhile, the social environment involves interaction within the family, the level of education of the parents, and the support of the community. Humphrey et al. (2022) emphasize that poor sanitation, such as lack of access to proper toilets, can increase the risk of gastrointestinal infections in children, which directly inhibits the absorption of nutrients.

Access to health services and stunting prevention programs in this area is still limited. Many families have not received enough information about the importance of a balanced diet, environmental cleanliness, and regular health checkups for pregnant women and children. This condition is further exacerbated by the perception of people who consider stunting only as a physical problem in children, without realizing its serious long-term impact (Tiyas, 2023).

In the Sunggal Village area, Medan Sunggal District, environmental challenges are still the main problem. Based on data from the National Health Survey (2022), only 65% of households have access to clean water, while decent sanitation facilities are only available to 45% of the population. This condition contributes to the high cases of infections, such as diarrhea and worms, which are one of the main causes of stunting. Solutions to address this problem include community-based intervention programs, such as education on the importance of environmental cleanliness, the construction of sanitation facilities, and the provision of clean water. Collaboration between local governments, health institutions, and local communities is needed to accelerate the improvement of environmental conditions. In addition, the involvement of village officials is also very important in helping to solve this problem by contributing through parenting activities in the form of soldering and workshops to prevent stunting.

The workshop held in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District is an important step in empowering parents to prevent stunting through understanding healthy diets. This activity involves a hands-on demonstration of how to cook nutritious food made from local. Ingredients such as fresh vegetables, eggs, chicken are used to show that healthy food can be processed simply and affordably.

However, observations during the workshop showed that although the parents seemed enthusiastic during the cooking session, their understanding of the concept of stunting was still limited. Many people are not aware of the link between diet and stunting risk. The presentation material on the causes of stunting, although it has been clearly conveyed, has not succeeded in significantly improving understanding. This was revealed from the post-event interview, where one of the participants had difficulty explaining the meaning and causes of stunting.

From the results of an interview with the mother of the PKK of Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District, it was stated that stunting must be watched out for, starting from the bride-to-be, because after marriage she will have children who must be considered from an early age. The main factor in the occurrence of stunting in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District is early marriage, from the environment, parenting, and diet. The daily diet given to children is still not enough for children's nutritional needs, because there are children who do not like vegetables and choose to choose food, such as ready-to-eat food. In addition to diet, the surrounding environment also affects the occurrence of stunting. The source stated that in the neighborhood where he lives, he still does not use septic tanks, and often floods. This problem has been submitted to the local government, but until now there has been no bright spot from the government. The resource person also stated that the economy in Pangalengan is stable, because most residents have fields and vegetable and fruit gardens. The resource person hopes that many of his children are healthy, grow and develop rapidly, are tall and their weight is appropriate. The government must also be involved in seeing and surveying stunting cases, and the government must also support stunting prevention.

"Failure to grow in the age of toddlers, due to lack of nutritious food". This indicates the need for more effective approaches, such as the use of visual-based or simulation-based educational methods, that can help parents better understand concepts. In addition, follow-up activities in the form of direct assistance in the household can also strengthen the application of knowledge that has been obtained during the workshop.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that stunting is a complex problem and involves various factors, so it requires a comprehensive intervention that includes diet, environmental conditions, and public education. The workshop held had a positive impact on raising awareness, although there are still obstacles in understanding that need to be overcome with more innovative approaches. Stunting prevention requires solid cooperation between the government, health workers, and local communities. Programs such as the construction of sanitation facilities, increased access to nutritious food, and community-based health education are strategic steps to overcome the challenges of stunting in areas such as Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the important role of parents in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District in preventing stunting through improving children's diet and environmental conditions. The results of the study show that the knowledge of parents in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District about child nutrition is still limited, while poor environmental sanitation conditions are the main obstacle. Community-based interventions, such as workshops and mentoring, have proven to be effective in increasing parental awareness in Sunggal Village, Medan Sunggal District. However, a more innovative approach is needed to deepen understanding of stunting and encourage behavior change. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of cooperation between families, communities, and the government in efforts to prevent stunting.

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