

**- Child development**

## Helping a child's brain development

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AS parents, it is perfectly normal to want the best for our children. We nurture them lovingly so they can grow into healthy, intelligent, and successful adults. Hence, many parents often send them to reputable preschools, purchase good books and toys, or spend hours reading to their children.



However, despite our best efforts, we may overlook our child's growth as we engage in day-to-day activities, until we realise the child is much smaller or shorter than his peers. The growth of a child is the best indicator for their overall health status. Children who are growing well tend to develop optimally over time, while stunted growth may affect the child's overall health and most importantly, their brain development.

The brain grows rapidly during the first 2 years of life, and is the centre for all communication that happens within a human body. A child is born with billions of neurons. More important is the connections between these brain cells that enable a child to move, think, and interact.

An important factor which creates these connections is proper nutrition, in addition to responsive care and a stimulating environment. Nutrition has a significant effect on a child's growth and development which may contribute to long-term effects up to adulthood.

In the first few months after birth, up to 75 per cent of all nutrients absorbed by an infant is used to produce brain cells and the connections between them! Thus, it is crucial that children receive adequate nutrition to ensure their neurodevelopment is optimal.

Poor growth can lead to poor brain development. Young children who suffer from stunting may never be able to gain full cognitive capabilities as the connections between the brain cells are disrupted. With impaired cognitive development, our children may also be affected in terms of school performance, which may eventually affect their future earning capabilities.

Stunting means that the child's height is too short given their age. It is one of the best indicators that a child may not be doing well, and occurs when children do not receive enough energy and nutrients to grow properly.

In fact, it is one of the most common forms of undernutrition among young children globally. In Malaysia, the prevalence of stunting among children under 5 years old has in-

creased from 16.6 per cent in 2011 to 21.8 per cent last year.

Some of the factors include poor and limited food choices, feeding difficulties, low parental awareness and lack of regular assessment. Since stunting is a gradual process, it maybe difficult for parents to identify growth problems.

For this reason, the Malaysian Paediatric Association supported by Abbott Malaysia initiated a nationwide campaign to help optimise growth in children, and would like to invite all parents with young children to participate.

During this campaign, your child's doctor will first measure your child's height to identify if your little one is stunted, at-risk of stunting or normal. Your child's weight will also be measured to determine his or her weight status.

You can also discuss your little one's eating patterns, sleep, screen time, and play time or physical activity behaviours. Your doctor may ask additional questions to spot the underlying causes or issues which are affecting their growth.

Finally, your doctor will suggest suitable approaches to help your child eat better, thus enhancing or maximising your little one's nutrient intake during mealtimes.

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