- Children—nutrition

Good nutrition key to nurturing young minds

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THE numbers are stark and sobering. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022, one in every four adolescents in Malaysia suffers from depression while one in 10 has attempted suicide.



A Unicef study further paints a troubling picture, revealing that even children as young as 10 years old living in People's Housing Project (PPR) areas report significant psychological distress.

The underlying causes of this mental health crisis are as multifaceted as they are concerning. Dr Norzila Zakaria, a psychiatrist at Universiti Sains Malaysia Hospital, highlights a toxic cocktail of factors, including academic pressure, the relentless influence of social media, erosion of family time, and the emotional strain wrought by poverty and divorce.

It is tempting to dismiss these struggles as a by-product of a so-called "strawberry generation", but such simplifications are not only unfair, they are also dangerously misguided.

Recognising the urgency, the Health Ministry and Education Ministry have rolled out initiatives to tackle the problem. These include mental health literacy programmes for parents and educators, annual mental health screenings for students, and interventions like the Healthy Mind Intervention Programme Module, also known as Modul Program Intervensi Minda Sihat (Prisma).

Yet, an often-overlooked factor in this equation is the role of nutrition and physical activity in shaping mental health outcomes for children.

There is a growing body of evidence linking nutrition to mental health. Studies consistently show that children who consume a diet rich in whole, nutritious foods are less likely to experience mental health issues compared to their peers subsisting on processed, energy-dense foods.

Malnutrition does not just hinder physical growth; it also stunts cognitive development and erodes academic performance, compounding the pressures children already face in the classroom.

For underprivileged families, the challenge of maintaining a healthy diet is particularly acute. Rising costs of living mean that affordable, healthy food options are often out of reach. Instead, children are fed cheap, calorie-dense meals devoid of essential nutrients, a vicious cycle that perpetuates poor mental health outcomes and academic struggles.

Healthy eating and regular physical activity can act as powerful buffers against stress, depression, and anxiety.

Equipping children and parents with practical nutritional knowledge, such as understanding the food pyramid, adopting balanced meal planning, and making healthy recipe modifications, should be a cornerstone of Malaysia's mental health strategy.

Equally important is ensuring that children, particularly those in low-income communities, have access to structured physical activities.

Sports can serve as an emotional outlet, reduce stress, and foster peer connections, all of which are critical for mental well-being.

One programme making meaningful strides in this space is World Vision Malaysia's Eat Right to Play Right (ERTPR) initiative. Operating within B40 communities, the programme marries nutrition education with sports, empowering children to make healthier choices while simultaneously engaging in badminton training.

ERTPR also involves parents, particularly mothers, through community kitchen sessions. These workshops, held bi-monthly, equip mothers with the skills to prepare healthier meals, thus reshaping the home food environment.

The results speak for themselves: In just two years, participating children have shown improvements in nutritional status and confidence while mothers report adopting healthier cooking habits.

Initiatives like ERTPR underscore the importance of tackling mental health holistically, addressing both emotional and physical well-being. For children in underprivileged communities, such programmes offer not only the prospect of better nutrition but also the chance to thrive emotionally and socially.

Nutrition and physical activity are not mere adjuncts to mental health care; they are foundational pillars. By investing in these areas, we can give every child, regardless of their socioeconomic background, a fair shot at a healthier, happier future.