



Nourishing the future

Studies suggest that families who eat together during meal-times tend to have a higher quality diet with more fruits and vegetables. — Photos: 123rf

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MALAYSIA may be a food paradise, but its children aren't getting enough nutrients – at least not of the right kind.

In November last year, Deputy Health Minister Lukanisman Awang Sauni said in Parliament that some 29.7% of kids between zero and four years old had, or are currently suffering, from stunting, citing Health Ministry's data in the last five years.

Kelantan and Putrajaya, he said, had among the highest ratio of children suffering from it, and the issue isn't limited to the lower income group.

"Those with lower incomes tend to go for cheaper and less nutritional food due to their limited financial resources... whereas many with higher incomes are more career-focused, which leaves them little time to cook at home," he had said.

Stunting is defined by World Health Organisation (WHO) as low height-for-age, and is the result of chronic or recurrent undernutrition. While to a layman, the issue might sound solely about height, from a medical perspective, the condition is much more sinister.

Stunting, the WHO says, prevents children from reaching their physical and cognitive potential. The condition is "largely irreversible" because "a child cannot recover height the same way that they can regain weight."

Children who are stunted fall sick more frequently, miss learning opportunities, do less well in school and grow up to be economically disadvantaged. They are also more likely to suffer from chronic diseases.

On the other end of the spectrum, another 30% of Malaysian kids are either overweight or obese.

In 2022, the Southeast Asian Nutrition Surveys (Seanuts II), which studied the nutritional status, dietary intake and lifestyle behaviours of some 14,000 children between six months to 12 years old in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, found that one-third of Malaysian children aged between seven and 12 are overweight or obese.

At the core of these two problems is the lack of nutrition education; including teaching parents what to feed their children and empowering children to make healthy choices as they grow up.

Taylor's University School of Food Sciences and Gastronomy senior lecturer Dr Salini Devi Rajendran says the lack of



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Seah says if parents themselves don't make great food choices, it's unfair to expect their children to do so. — Dr SHIRLEY SEAH

nutrition education is a serious issue with long-term negative repercussions.

"We live in an age of abundant information. Parents know what they need to feed their children, but many lack the will or perseverance to educate themselves and their children about how important it is to feed the body right," she says.

While she understands that the lower income group may find it hard to put healthy food on the table due to rising prices, she says this doesn't mean that families with better income eat better, even when they are financially able to do so.

"Some well-to-do families consider easy access to food as a luxury so they eat what they like. The awareness (about a healthy diet) is there but there's still the question of whether families are practising it. Many of us know about the "quarter-quarter-half" Malaysian Healthy Plate, but how many of us really do that?" she asks.

Influential agent

Parents, Salini says, are children's first "influential socialisation agent" who play a very important role in providing children with food environment and experience. "Family-based nutrition education is important in shaping eating behaviours. Home is where kids first learn about food."

Sunway Medical Centre dietitian Dr Shirley Seah says the fundamental foun-

ation parents need to teach their children is a healthy relationship with food. Modelling good eating behaviour is one of the most effective ways to do this.

"As often as possible, eat together as a family. This is a great way to model positive food behaviour in children. Eating together allows for opportunities to try new foods, eating slowly at the table and enjoying a meal. Studies have also suggested that families who eat together during mealtimes tend to have diets that are of higher quality, with more fruits and vegetables and less fast food and sugary beverages," Seah says.

She adds that families should also keep all conversations around food positive, including not making negative comments about a child's or anyone else's appearance or eating patterns.

"This can help strengthen your child's relationship with food. Positive conversations should also centre on 'eating real food', as much as you can, including having lots of fruits and vegetables and listening to your body's cues for hunger and fullness. There should be no 'forbidden foods'," Seah says.

"Avoid labelling foods as 'good' or 'bad' or use words that imply that certain foods are better or worse than others. Kids may internalise these negative remarks and in turn, lead to food shaming or developing unhealthy eating habits or disordered eating," she says.

Salini says parents should also inculcate in their kids the "belief in eating" or the reason why we eat what we eat. "Eating is inextricably linked to emotions and knowing why we eat fosters a healthy relationship with food. We eat rendang to celebrate Hari Raya, for example, or a birthday cake to celebrate birthdays," she says.

"Most days, we should eat well to keep our body healthy, but that doesn't mean we can't – from time to time, and in controlled portions – eat food that makes us happy," she says.

Dangers of food as love language

Asian mothers (also grandmothers and aunts) are known to express their love through food, often asking kids if they have eaten and cooking up a storm for the family, especially for special occasions.

Seah says this traditional mindset around food among Asian parents may lead to overeating in children. "It is common for Asian parents to always ask whether their child has eaten, or being concerned whether their child has eaten