All children deserve the healthiest possible start in life. However, one in three children under age five in Viet Nam do not currently meet their full height potential—which is linked with serious consequences on cognitive, social, and economic outcomes.\(^1\) Stunting, or being too short for one’s age, is an irreversible outcome of chronic nutritional deficiency during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life. And the damage it causes to a child’s development is permanent.\(^2\) Other immediate causes of stunting include maternal and child infections, and underlying causes related to hygiene, sanitation, and poverty.

While all children have the ability to grow at the same rate until age five, stunting often goes unrecognized because children live in communities where short stature is so common that it seems normal, or because its serious consequences are not widely understood.\(^2\)

Viet Nam has achieved incredible social and economic progress over the last decade—but that progress is limited by the stunted growth of our children. By devoting greater attention and resources to simple, cost-effective solutions that help families make the best health and nutrition choices, particularly infant and young child feeding, we can ensure that every child in Viet Nam has a better chance of reaching their full physical and mental potential.

**STUNTING PREDICTS HEALTH AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES LATER IN LIFE**

When a child is stunted, it means that essential physical and mental growth processes are being compromised.

Research shows that if the root causes of stunting are not addressed during the first two years of life, the impacts of the growth restriction prevail through adulthood.\(^3, 4\)

**Health consequences**

- For infants and young children, stunting is associated with a weaker immune system and higher risk of severe infectious diseases. When undernourished children become adults, they are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.\(^5, 7\)

- It is estimated that children under the age of five who are born to the shortest mothers (less than 145 centimeters) have a 40 percent increased risk of mortality.\(^8\)

- Stunted women have higher maternal mortality rates and are more likely to have small and underweight babies—leading to a cycle of poor nutrition and poverty.\(^2, 6\) A low birth weight child is more likely to be shorter during adulthood than one not born with a low birth weight.\(^9\)

**How Does Viet Nam Rank?**

30 percent of children under age five in Viet Nam are stunted (about 2.5 million), giving Viet Nam the 13th highest stunting rate in the world.\(^1, 5\)
Education and economic consequences

- Stunted children are more likely to start school later and drop out, and are less able to learn due to compromised brain and mental development at a young age. Stunting at age two is associated with reduced school attendance of nearly one year and a 16 percent increased risk of a child failing at least one grade while attending school.\(^6\), \(^10\), \(^11\)

- Compromised growth has been linked to lower economic productivity and incomes.\(^12\)

- Studies have shown that a 1 percent increase in height is associated with a 2.4 percent increase in wages. Compounded over an entire lifetime, malnutrition can reduce a child’s earning potential by as much as 10 percent.\(^13\), \(^14\)

- The effects of stunting impact an entire nation. It’s estimated that investing in infant and young child nutrition can increase a country’s gross domestic product by 2 to 3 percent.\(^15\)

ALL CHILDREN CAN REACH THEIR FULL HEIGHT POTENTIAL—NO MATTER WHERE THEY LIVE

Optimal nutrition is critical to children everywhere reaching their full physical and mental potential, regardless of their ethnicity or race. Scientists agree that improving child feeding practices during the first two years of life must be a high priority for reducing child mortality and disease, and fostering economic development.

Addressing feeding practices during the “critical window of opportunity”

The time between pregnancy and the first two years of life provide a “critical window of opportunity” to prevent and reverse stunting before its effects are permanent:

- Eliminating malnutrition in mothers can reduce disabilities in their infants by almost one third. It also is important that expectant mothers eat a variety of foods, receive essential micronutrients, and have adequate rest.

- All children should be breastfed early (within one hour of birth) and exclusively for the first six months of life. No other food or liquid is needed, including water.

- When children reach six months of age, they should receive enough healthy semi-solid and solid foods, along with continued breastfeeding through 23 months, to continue growing properly. In Viet Nam, complementary foods are often introduced too early and are of poor quality, which means they don’t provide the right variety of foods (iron-rich foods, animal foods, vegetables, fruits, dairy, grains, and oils) in the right amounts. Only slightly more than half—52 percent—of children under two years are receiving optimal complementary foods.\(^1\)
Implications for policies and programs

We must raise awareness among policymakers about the impacts of stunting and call upon them to support key policies that can enable better feeding practices throughout Viet Nam:

- Strengthen regulations and enforcement of Decree 21 to more tightly regulate advertising and marketing of infant foods, including higher penalties for violations.
- Extend maternity leave from four to six months to provide mothers the support and ability to exclusively breastfeed. When mothers exclusively breastfeed on demand, it prevents early introduction of complementary foods.
- Promote optimal feeding practices through health care providers and facilities, including clear communication to patients about the best feeding practices from birth through age two.

For more information on infant and young child feeding, please visit www.aliveandthrive.org, (+84-4) 3573-9066; www.mattroibetho.vn, (+84-4) 3971-7090; and www.unicef.org/vietnam, (+84-4) 3942-5706.

By supporting policies and program that can improve feeding practices, we can reduce stunting and achieve greater health and economic prosperity for all of Viet Nam.

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Sources