Scientia Review, Vol. 01(03), September 2025, pp. 12-14

Scientia Review

Website: www.scientiafoundation.in

POPULAR SCIENCE ARTICLE

Child Nutrition and Early Development Building a Healthy Foundation

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Received: 21 August 2025
Revised: 28 August 2025
Accepted: 29 August 2025
Published online: 2 September 2025

Article ID: SR01018

Citation: Bora, P. & Bordoloi, R. (2025). Child Nutrition and Early Development Building a Healthy Foundation. *Scientia Review*, 1(3), 12-14

Abstract

Child nutrition is fundamental to early development and overall well-being. Adequate nutrition during the initial years of life supports physical growth, cognitive development and emotional stability. Conversely, malnutrition or insufficient nutrient intake can result in long-term effects such as stunted growth, impaired cognitive function and increased vulnerability to diseases. Balanced diets, breastfeeding, appropriate complementary feeding and micronutrient supplementation are essential components for promoting healthy development. Practical strategies for parents, caregivers and policymakers are critical to ensuring children receive the necessary nutrients for optimal growth and development.

Keywords: Nutrition, Development, Physical growth, Cognitive, Breastfeeding, Micronutrients

Introduction

Nutrition during childhood is a cornerstone for building a healthy foundation. The early years of life are characterized by rapid physical growth, brain development and the formation of lifelong dietary habits. Inadequate nutrition during this critical period can lead to long-lasting consequences, including delayed motor skills, poor cognitive performance and weakened immunity. The World Health Organization recognizes child nutrition as a fundamental human right and a determinant of future health and productivity (World Health Organization, 2021). Understanding the specific nutritional needs of children and implementing strategies to meet these needs is essential for parents, caregivers and policymakers alike.

Children require a balance of macronutrients, including carbohydrates, proteins and fats, along with micronutrients such as iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin A and vitamin D for optimal development (Black *et al*., 2013). Breastfeeding is widely recognized as the ideal source of nutrition for infants during the first six months of life, providing essential nutrients, antibodies and promoting bonding between mother and child (Victora *et al*., 2016). Complementary feeding introduced at six months ensures continued growth and development and should include a variety of nutrient-dense foods to meet increasing energy and nutrient requirements.

Nutritional Requirements for Early Childhood

During infancy and early childhood, the body requires adequate calories for energy and specific nutrients for growth and brain development. Proteins are essential for the synthesis of body tissues, enzymes and hormones. Carbohydrates provide energy for metabolic processes and physical activity, while fats support brain development and the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins (WHO, 2004). Micronutrients such as iron support haemoglobin formation and cognitive function, zinc is critical for immune function and vitamin D supports bone growth and calcium absorption. **Table 1** illustrates the recommended daily nutrient intake for children at different ages.

Table 1: Recommended Daily Nutrient Intake for Children at Different Ages (WHO, 2004)

Age Group	Energy (kcal/day)	Protein (g/day)	Iron (mg/day)	Calcium (mg/day)	Vitamin A (µg/day)	Vitamin D (IU/day)
Infants 0–6 months	500	9	0.27	210	400	400
Infants 6–12 months	800	11	11	270	500	400
Children 1–3 years	1200	13	7	500	300	400
Children 4–8 years	1600	19	10	800	400	600

Role of Breastfeeding in Early Development

Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months is considered the gold standard of infant nutrition. Breast milk provides all essential nutrients in the right proportions and contains bioactive compounds that enhance immunity and reduce the risk of infections (Victora *et al*., 2016). Breastfeeding has also been associated with improved cognitive development and emotional bonding. Mothers are encouraged to continue breastfeeding along with complementary feeding up to two years or beyond to sustain nutritional and emotional benefits.

Complementary Feeding and Dietary Diversity

After six months of age, infants require additional nutrients that breast milk alone cannot provide. Complementary feeding should introduce a variety of foods including grains, proteins, fruits and vegetables to ensure adequate nutrient intake (Dewey, 2001). Dietary diversity supports the development of healthy eating habits and reduces the risk of micronutrient deficiencies. Iron-rich foods are particularly important during this stage, as iron stores from birth begin to deplete. Vitamin A rich foods such as orange vegetables support immune function and vision.

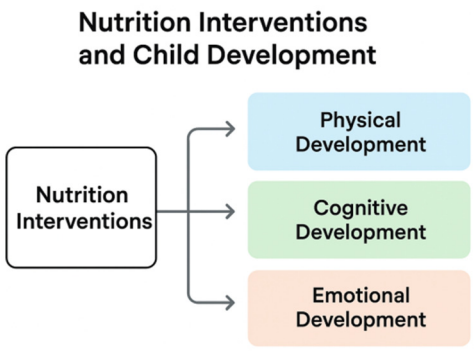
Impact of Malnutrition on Growth and Development

Malnutrition during early childhood can manifest as undernutrition or overnutrition. Undernutrition leads to stunting, wasting and underweight, while overnutrition can result in overweight and obesity. Stunting is associated with impaired cognitive development and reduced educational achievement and wasting increases vulnerability to infections and mortality (Black *et al*., 2013). Addressing malnutrition requires a multi-faceted approach, including food security, maternal education and access to healthcare services.

Micronutrient Supplementation

Micronutrient deficiencies are common in many developing countries and can have severe consequences on growth and development. Iron deficiency anaemia impairs cognitive development and increases susceptibility to infections. Vitamin D deficiency leads to rickets and poor bone health. Supplementation programs targeting vulnerable populations have been shown to improve health outcomes and prevent long-term complications (Bhutta *et al*., 2013).

Nutritional Interventions and Policies



Government and community-based interventions play a crucial role in ensuring child nutrition. Policies promoting breastfeeding, maternal nutrition and food fortification are effective

strategies to prevent malnutrition. School-based feeding programs and nutrition education campaigns increase awareness among parents and caregivers about the importance of balanced diets (**Fig. 1**).

The Role of Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers play a key role in promoting proper nutrition at home. Providing well-balanced meals, introducing diverse foods and fostering healthy eating habits can profoundly affect a child's growth and developmental outcomes. Additionally, offering emotional support and practicing responsive feeding contribute to improved eating behaviours and overall well-being.

Conclusion

Child nutrition is the foundation for healthy development and lifelong well-being. Adequate intake of macronutrients and micronutrients through breastfeeding, complementary feeding and diverse diets supports physical growth, cognitive development and emotional stability. Malnutrition has long-lasting negative effects that can impact educational achievement and productivity in adulthood. Nutritional interventions supported by policy initiatives and caregiver education are essential for ensuring children reach their full developmental potential. Collaborative efforts between families, communities and governments are vital to build a healthy future for children.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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