

Efforts taken to address nutritional gaps among children

The Government recognises the importance of nutrition for children in their early years, which are the foundation for their healthy growth and development, said Minister of State for Education and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling.

She was commenting on a National University of Singapore (NUS) study which found that poor eating and nutrition habits in young children were significantly linked to behavioural problems, and that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds had unhealthier diets.

Ms Sun highlighted the KidStart programme, led by the Early Childhood Development Agency, which

provides families with the knowledge and skills to nurture their children's early development.

"Our KidStart practitioners visit homes and work directly with parents and young children, including guiding them on their children's nutritional needs," said Ms Sun. KidStart also works closely with community and corporate partners to ensure families who are in need will also receive food sponsorship support or social assistance.

Ms Sun added that childcare centres and schools also pay attention to the nutritional needs of young children. For instance, all childcare centres provide breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack to children and, in keeping with

Health Promotion Board guidelines, the meals must be nutritious, balanced and varied.

"Primary and secondary students on financial assistance in Ministry of Education schools also receive substantial subsidies for healthy meals in schools," she said.

Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS who led the study, said it was important to address food insecurity in young children, as early behaviour problems may have long-lasting implications for children's learning when they enter school.

Food insecurity affects both adults and children in the family, and it should be acknowledged

that food filled psychological and emotional needs, she said.

Prof Yeung cited several reasons that families of low socio-economic status find it difficult to adopt healthy eating guidelines. These included not having enough family financial resources as well as a lack of knowledge about the harmful long-term effects of processed food, fast food and sugar sweetened beverages.

The study said that 37 per cent of those living in rented or owned one- or two-room flats reported that the food they bought was not enough and they could not afford to buy more.

It said 20 per cent reported that they could not afford to eat bal-

anced meals, and 14 per cent acknowledged that their children were not eating enough because they "just couldn't afford enough food".

"For programmes and policies to effectively address food insecurity in children from low socio-economic status families, it is important that a participatory approach be used so that the needs of the whole child are addressed," said Prof Yeung.

This means that communities affected should be involved in the formative stage of designing an intervention so that underlying causes of food insecurity can be addressed, she added.

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