

Promoting young child nutrition – the Malaysian experience

E-Siong Tee, PhD

TES NutriHealth Strategic Consultancy, Malaysia

Recognising that children are a particularly vulnerable group, their nutrition status has been continuously monitored through the nutrition surveillance programme of the Ministry of Health Malaysia. The largest data set on nutritional status of children (1-18 years) in Malaysia is the 2006 3rd National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS III) of the Ministry of Health Malaysia. According to findings from this nationwide survey, 13.2% of children were underweight, 15.8% were stunted, and 10.4% were wasted. The percentage of overweight children (5%), on the other hand, was of a lower magnitude. The findings also made it quite clear that younger children, particularly those in the 1-6 years group, were the most affected with under-nutrition and over-nutrition problems.

Compared with findings reported 3 decades ago, these recent findings show that nutritional status of children has improved markedly over the years. There is however no room for complacency as there is still a significant prevalence of malnourished children across the country. On the other hand, whereas overweight was not highlighted in previous studies, it is now a significant problem amongst young children.

In cognizance of the situation, health and nutrition intervention programmes in the country have always given high priority to children. One of the five enabling strategies of the National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) of Malaysia (2006-2015) focuses on promoting optimal infant and young children feeding practices. Another enabling strategy emphasizes the importance of the promotion of healthy eating and healthy lifestyle through intensification of education programmes from young.

In response to the call of the NPAN, a 3-year Healthy Children, Healthier Nation programme was carried out under the Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) initiative. NMM is a nationwide nutrition promotion programme spearheaded by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, commencing from 2002. In the first year of this child nutrition programme in 2009, the focus was on young children 1-6 years old. In all educational materials, the emphasis has been that parents should nourish and nurture their children, especially when they are in the crucial formative years. Nutrient needs of young children are high, higher than for adolescents and adults in terms of energy or nutrients per kg body weight.

Messages to parents to help them raise healthy young children have been based on the Malaysian dietary guidelines. These guidelines focus on eating a variety of foods, eating a balance diet and eating in moderation. Milk and dairy products, with their well known nutritional properties, can certainly contribute significantly towards meeting a child's nutritional needs. Recognizing this, Ministry of Health Malaysia has permitted the creation of a new category of milk powder for children, regulated by a specific regulation.

Termed as Formulated Milk Powder for Children (FMPC), the nutrient profile of this new category has been developed based on the Malaysian Recommended Nutrient Intake (RNI), to meet the nutritional needs of growing children. FMPC is positioned as a supplementary food for children 1-9 years, to contribute to about 1/3 of the recommended daily intake of a child. It is envisaged to provide good quality protein, calcium and iron, and other nutrients and food components and is deemed to be more nutritious than to consume other beverages of doubtful nutritional value. It is intended that this FMPC will enable this food to be made widely available to mothers, to supplement nutrient intake of their children, ensure they meet daily requirements. This will also help to inculcate milk drinking habit, which should be continued even later in life.