

'EDUCATION OF MOTHERS DIRECTLY LINKED TO BETTER NUTRITION FOR CHILDREN'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Poverty & Hunger and related issues

A first-of-its kind pan-India survey conducted by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry on nutrition levels among children shows a direct correlation between mothers' education and the well-being of children.

The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNSS) studied 1.2 lakh children between 2016 and 2018 and measured food consumption, anthropometric data, micronutrients, anaemia, iron deficiency and markers of non-communicable diseases.

These were compared with different population characteristics such as religion, caste, place of residence and the mothers' level of schooling.

The data recorded show 31% of mothers of children aged up to four years, 42% of women having children aged five to nine and 53% of mothers of adolescents aged 10-19 never attended school. Only 20% of mothers of pre-schoolers, 12% of those of schoolchildren, and 7% of those of adolescents had completed 12 or more years of schooling.

Core indicators

Diet diversity, meal frequency and minimum acceptable diet are the three core indicators of nutrition deficiency among infant and young children.

Data from the CNNS study show that with higher levels of schooling in a mother, children received better diets. Only 11.4% of children of mothers with no schooling received adequately diverse meals, while 31.8% whose mothers finished Class XII received diverse meals.

The study found 3.9% of children whose mothers had zero schooling got minimum acceptable diets, whereas this was at 9.6% for children whose mothers finished schooling. Moreover, 7.2% of children in the former category consumed iron rich food, whereas this was at 10.3% for children in the latter category.

The proportion of children aged two to four consuming dairy products, eggs and other fruits and vegetables the previous day increased with the mothers' education level and household wealth status. For example, only 49.8% of children in that age group whose mothers did not go to school consumed dairy products, while 80.5% of children of mothers who completed their schooling did so. These trends also show among older children and adolescents — only 25.4% of children in the 5-9 age group with uneducated mothers received eggs, but 45.3% of children whose mothers studied till Class XII had eggs.

Stunting, wasting

Levels of stunting, wasting and low weight were higher in children whose mothers received no schooling as opposed to those who studied till Class XII. Stunting among children aged up to four was nearly three times for the former category (19.3% versus 5.9%), and the number of underweight children was nearly double among them (14.8% versus 5.1%) as compared to the latter category. Also, 5.7% of the children were wasted in the former category, while this was at 4.3% in the latter category.

Anaemia saw a much higher prevalence of 44.1% among children up to four years old with mothers who never went to school, versus 34.6% among those who completed their schooling.

Flip side

But on the flip side, a higher level of education among mothers meant that their children received meals less frequently, perhaps because their chances of being employed and travelling long distances to work went up — 50.4% of children in the age group of 6-23 months born to illiterate mothers versus 36.2% among those who had finished schooling.

Such children were also at higher risk of diabetes and high cholesterol as relative prosperity could lead to higher consumption of sugary drinks and foods high in cholesterol. Children in the age group of 10-19 showed a higher prevalence of pre-diabetes if their mother had finished schooling (15.1% versus 9.6%). The prevalence of high cholesterol levels was at 6.2% in these children as opposed to 4.8% among those whose mothers never attended school.

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