

# Stunting: Malnutrition or Exploitation?

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Two girls aged seven, one showing the dramatic effects of stunting.

Childhood stunting is one of the most significant impediments to human development, globally affecting approximately 162 million children under the age of 5 years. Stunting, or being too short for one's age, is defined as a height that is more than two standard deviations below the Child Growth Standards median of the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>1</sup> Factors that contribute to stunted growth and development include – but are not limited to – poor maternal health and nutrition, inadequate infant and young child feeding practices, and infection.

Klaus Kraemer, quite rightly, claims that stunting should be made a development indicator.<sup>2</sup>

Stunting is the face of poverty,<sup>3</sup> and that observation is very true, but endemic poverty also induces child labor. If the nutritional intake of a child is just above the threshold that could result in stunting, the child would normally grow to a normal height. But, if the child has to work long hours and perform calorie-consuming manual labor, then those calories and other nutrients cannot be used for growth. This will result

in stunting, even though the intake of nutrients is within the accepted levels.

Thus, I would suggest that stunting is not only the result of malnutrition, but also of child exploitation. Both are indicative of poverty.

“Stunting is not only the result of malnutrition, but also of child exploitation”

However, if children in developed countries are forced to undergo rigorous training for, say, gymnastics or soccer, growth will also be stunted. Take, for instance, female gymnasts who resemble small children but are already adults.<sup>4</sup> While we all can agree that these athletes probably eat meals that contain more than enough nutrients, their bodies cannot resolve where to use these nutrients. The body uses nutrients to enhance the short-term goals to the detriment of long-term growth. And even here we can see an element of exploitation.

Therefore, stunting is not only an indicator of malnutrition in children, but also of the exploitation of children. And while stunting is usually monitored in children less than five years of age, stunting as a result of exploitation should be monitored in children older than five years of age.

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## References

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