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Cultivating Clean and Healthy Living Behaviors (PHBS) to Reduce Stunting Rates in Watas Marga Village

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Abstract. Stunting remains a significant public health problem in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas facing challenges of recurrent infections, inadequate hygiene practices, and poor sanitation. Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) is a simple yet effective approach to reducing this risk. This community service activity aims to strengthen mothers' understanding and implementation of PHBS as a key strategy for stunting prevention in Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through counseling, demonstrations, observations, and group discussions, the program involved 32 mothers and caregivers of toddlers. The activity focused on essential practices such as proper handwashing, clean water use, safe food handling, hygienic complementary feeding (MP-ASI), and household sanitation. Results from the activity demonstrated increased awareness of how simple, consistent hygiene practices can reduce the risk of infections that contribute to stunting. Participants also demonstrated improved handwashing skills and a strong commitment to implementing PHBS at home. The program confirms that strengthening PHBS at the household level is an effective, low-cost, and impactful intervention in stunting prevention in rural communities.

Keywords: *PHBS, Stunting, Prevention.*

INTRODUCTION

Stunting remains one of the most crucial public health challenges in Indonesia, particularly in rural and resource-limited areas, where environmental and behavioral risk factors are prevalent. National data shows that chronic malnutrition and repeated infections during the first 1,000 days of life are the main factors causing impaired growth and development in children (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). This condition not only impacts height but also affects cognitive capacity, endurance, and long-term productivity. According to the WHO, nearly one in four children in low-income areas experience stunted growth due to prolonged exposure to poor hygiene and inadequate sanitation (World Health Organization, 2023).

Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) is recognized as a simple yet highly effective strategy in reducing the risk of stunting. Research shows that up to 50% of stunting cases are related to repeated infections—particularly diarrhea and respiratory infections—which stem from poor hygiene practices, unsafe water, and contaminated food (UNICEF, 2022). Daily behaviors such as proper handwashing, safe water management, hygienic food preparation, exclusive breastfeeding, and maintaining a clean home environment can significantly reduce children's

exposure to pathogens (World Health Organization, 2024). This demonstrates that "small strategies" can have a "big impact" on children's growth and development and resilience.

In many rural communities, including Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village, gaps in PHBS practices are still common. Observations and informal interviews reveal that handwashing is often done without soap or not at critical times, clean water containers are left uncovered, and sanitation facilities are not consistently maintained. Similar findings have been reported in other villages in Indonesia, where limited knowledge and cultural practices contribute to hygiene-related health risks (Ambarwati et al., 2024). Repeated infections resulting from inadequate hygiene practices weaken nutrient absorption and metabolic processes, making children more susceptible to stunting even when food intake is relatively adequate (Rahayu & Setyowati, 2022).

Community-based health education plays a crucial role in strengthening PHBS practices, especially in areas with limited access to health promotion. Evidence shows that interactive methods such as demonstrations, group discussions, and household practice exercises are effective in increasing the understanding and implementation of healthy behaviors among mothers and caregivers (Aminuddin et al., 2024). By directly involving mothers, educational activities can address misconceptions and build practical skills, enabling families to implement PHBS more consistently in their daily routines.

Based on these conditions, this community service activity was carried out in Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village to increase mothers' awareness and skills in implementing PHBS as a key strategy for stunting prevention. Based on the principle that "small strategies create big impact," this program aims to motivate families to adopt simple, practical, and sustainable hygiene behaviors in their daily lives. Strengthening PHBS at the community level is expected to reduce the risk of infection, support healthy child growth and development, and contribute to the national agenda of reducing stunting prevalence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This Community Service Program (KKN-T) activity was conducted in November 2025 in Watas Marga Village, Rejang Lebong Regency, with the aim of strengthening Clean and Healthy Living Behaviors (PHBS) as a stunting prevention strategy. Thirty-two mothers and caregivers of toddlers participated, given their crucial role in hygiene practices, food preparation, and child feeding.

The initial phase began with problem identification through observation, informal interviews with health cadres, and a review of Community Health Center (Puskesmas) data. This assessment revealed behavioral gaps, including improper handwashing techniques, unsafe food handling, inconsistent household sanitation, and limited understanding of the link between infection and stunting. These findings underscored the need to strengthen PHBS as a basic, low-cost yet impactful intervention.

Based on the identification results, a needs analysis was conducted to determine appropriate educational media. Participants required applicable visual materials and props, such as PHBS posters, stunting prevention leaflets, and examples of correct handwashing practices. The analysis also emphasized the importance of an interactive approach to enable participants to understand and practice hygienic behaviors independently.

The program was implemented through structured educational sessions that included lectures, discussions, and demonstrations of the WHO six-step handwashing technique. Participants were also provided with guidance on household sanitation, clean water use, hygienic preparation of complementary foods (MP-ASI), and breastfeeding practices that support adequate nutrition. Practical exercises were conducted to ensure the participants' skills were developed effectively.

Evaluation included a simple pre-posttest, observation of handwashing skills, and participant reflection on planned behavior changes at home. Participants also signed a commitment to implementing PHBS (Healthy Living Behavior) as a sign of their willingness to make real changes. The evaluation results demonstrated an increase in participants' understanding and readiness to implement PHBS as a key strategy for stunting prevention and served as the basis for recommendations for further strengthening health education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The "PHBS as the Key to Stunting Prevention" activity in Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village, received a positive response from mothers and caregivers of toddlers. The activity began with an explanation of the relationship between hygiene, recurrent infections, and stunting. This topic was immediately relevant to the participants' experiences, as evidenced by the numerous complaints of diarrhea and recurrent infections in children.

In the main session, the facilitator emphasized that simple practices such as proper handwashing, clean water use, safe food handling, and household sanitation are easy yet impactful steps in preventing stunting. This aligns with observational findings that indicated problems with water storage, clean eating utensils, and family sanitation routines.

A demonstration of the WHO six-step handwashing technique was the most interactive part. Most participants were unfamiliar with the complete technique and did not have soap available near water sources. After the exercise, participants understood that proper handwashing is the primary defense against infection and committed to implementing it at home.

The distribution of leaflets and posters helped participants identify risks in their environment, such as open water containers and garbage disposal areas close to children's play areas. Group discussions yielded several practical steps that can be implemented immediately, such as washing hands before preparing food, cleaning eating utensils, covering food, and maintaining a clean yard.

At the end of the activity, participants' knowledge and confidence in implementing PHBS increased and their understanding of its benefits for stunting prevention was demonstrated. Participants' commitment to disseminating information to family and neighbors demonstrated the potential for ripple effects within the community. Overall, this activity demonstrated that contextualized PHBS education can empower communities with simple, affordable, and sustainable stunting prevention strategies.

Figure 1. Counseling Session with Mothers in Dusun II, Watas Marga Village

Figure 2. Distribution of PMT (Supplementary Feeding) to Mothers and Toddlers During the Activity

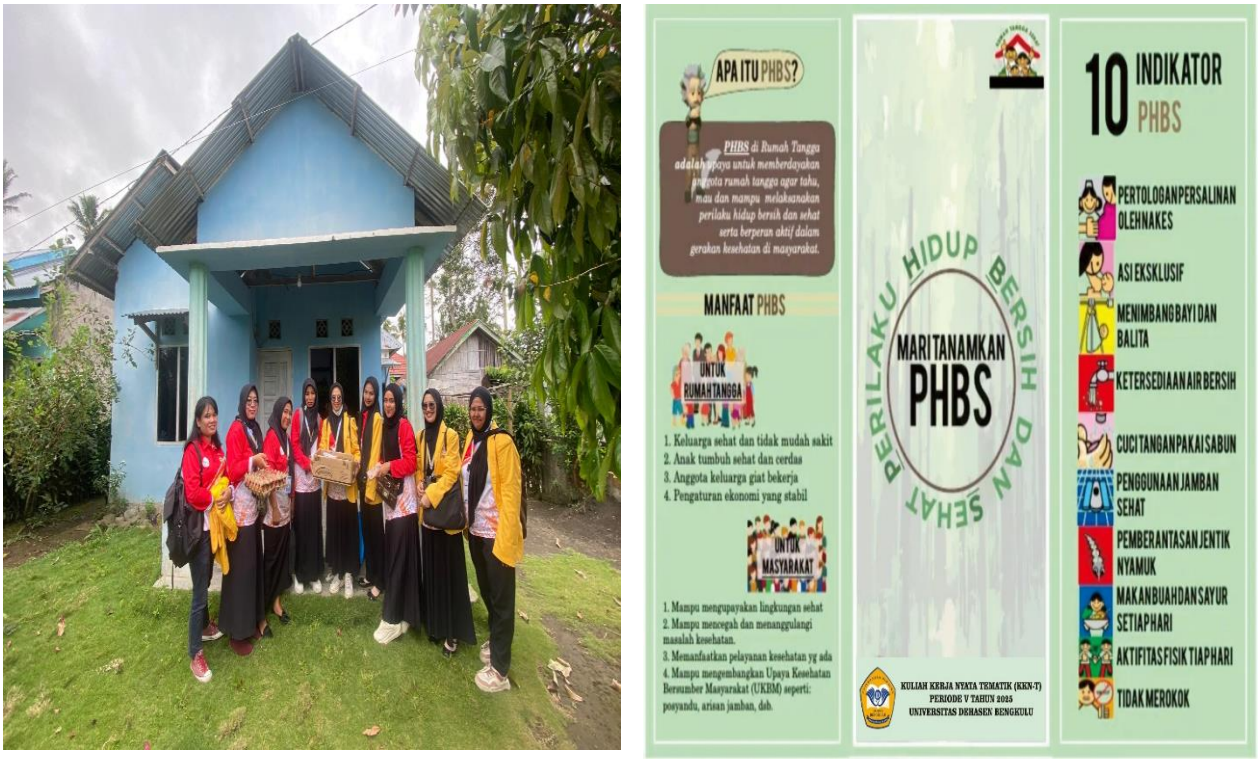

Figure 3. Group Photo of Participants and Facilitators and Stunting Prevention Leaflets

Figure 4. Tempat sampah Hasil Program KKN-T UNIVED Bengkulu Tahun

Problem Solving

The findings of the activity in Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village, confirmed that stunting cannot be addressed solely through nutritional interventions, but rather requires addressing the hygiene and sanitation challenges families face every day. One of the main problems identified was a lack of understanding of how repeated infections, particularly diarrhea and Acute Respiratory Infections (ARI), which arise from poor hygiene practices, can significantly hinder a child's growth. Most mothers associated stunting solely with food intake, thus leaving the crucial role of PHBS (Clean and Healthy Living) unclear.

To address this issue, this activity emphasized small-scale, practical behavior changes that can be implemented immediately at home. Demonstrating handwashing with soap and clean water was a simple yet effective intervention that helped participants visualize and practice contamination prevention measures. This approach transformed handwashing from a patchwork habit into a structured and truly beneficial practice. Several mothers admitted that before this activity, they rarely washed their hands before feeding their children, illustrating a behavioral gap that needed to be addressed.

Other challenges identified were water management and food safety. Some households still store water in open containers, and eating utensils are not always washed properly, especially when water is limited. Through visual materials and hands-on discussions, the program encourages families to implement small, yet impactful, steps such as covering water containers, washing eating utensils after each use, and ensuring that complementary foods are prepared and stored hygienically. These recommendations are designed as "small strategies" to help mothers understand that behavioral change doesn't require expensive equipment, but rather consistency in daily habits.

Waste disposal practices are also a significant factor contributing to recurrent infections in children. In some areas of Hamlet II, waste is still dumped near homes or burned irregularly, increasing the risk of flies and environmental contamination. Discussion sessions help mothers recognize these risks and encourage better waste management, such as regular disposal in designated locations and maintaining the cleanliness of yards where children often play.

A key aspect of solving the problem is shifting the community's mindset: from viewing stunting as an inevitable condition to one that is highly preventable through small, sustained

actions. Facilitators emphasize that stunting prevention is not solely the responsibility of health workers but requires the commitment and active participation of every family. The response from the village mothers was very positive; they expressed their readiness to consistently implement PHBS and even expressed a desire to remind other family members and neighbors about the importance of cleanliness.

Ultimately, solving the stunting problem in Watas Marga Village lies in the ability of families to implement solutions that are accessible, low-cost, and embedded in their daily routines. This activity demonstrated that when mothers are provided with clear guidance, live demonstrations, and concrete examples relevant to their daily lives, they are more likely to adopt and maintain PHBS practices. This shift in awareness and commitment lays a crucial foundation for long-term stunting prevention efforts in the community.

CONCLUSION

This community service activity demonstrated that strengthening PHBS (Healthy Living Behavior) is a practical, affordable, and effective approach to preventing stunting in Hamlet II, Watas Marga Village. Through outreach and demonstrations, mothers understood that simple practices such as proper handwashing, clean water management, and hygienic food preparation can reduce the risk of infections that cause growth disorders. This activity also increased participants' awareness, skills, and commitment to consistently implementing PHBS, emphasizing that stunting prevention depends not only on nutrition but also on daily hygiene practices. With simple yet sustainable strategies, this program has the potential to have a significant impact on the health and growth of children in Watas Marga Village.

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