

Boston

Malnutrition And Its Effects Reversible, Study Says

A new study shows that undernourishment and its negative effects can be treated after age two.

By Megan Tripp | Hub Health | December 13, 2013 11:58 am

In previously collected data, experts agreed on a 1,000 day window that would make the damaging effects of malnutrition on children's learning abilities permanent. However, a new study co-authored by a Boston University School of Public Health doctor extends that window six additional years.

The study examined 8,000 children participants in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam. Researchers looked closely at the relationship between cognitive function and growth recovery in these children. Specifically, they looked at the relationship between nutritional status post-infancy and height growth, and the correlation between height and cognitive function in math, reading, and vocabulary tests.

The study, which was published in the December issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, showed that children who were shorter than average at age one scored lower in cognitive tests by age eight than children who were considered to be at a normal height at age one. But, researchers discovered, children who were stunted at age one but considered normal by age eight scored higher on cognitive tests than those who remained shorter.

Researchers concluded that the previously established 1,000 day window was not as restrictive as experts once thought. Nutritional alterations and early childhood stimulation in the years leading up to age eight can have a significant impact on children's cognitive function later.

Dr. Kirk Dearden, the study's co-author and associate professor of international health at BU School of Public Health, said in a report:

"We're saying, 'don't stop after the first two years, because there's potential for kids to catch up in growth, learning and cognition.' Just because kids aren't doing well in the first year or so doesn't mean it's over."

The team of researchers stressed the importance of early nutritional intervention, and concluded that such interventions and alterations are also critical in the kindergarten and primary school years following the 1,000 window.

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