

The Influence of Responsive Parenting and Balanced Nutrition on Early Childhood Independence and Stunting Prevention

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Article info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Recieved: 17/11/2025</p> <p>Revised: 21/11/2025</p> <p>Accepted: 25/11/2025</p> <p>✉Corresponding author</p>	<p><i>Responsive parenting and balanced nutrition are essential factors supporting the holistic development of early childhood. This study examines the influence of these two factors on children's independence and stunting prevention using a quantitative correlational approach involving 46 parents at KB RA Mina Jadid, Mojokerto. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment correlation. The results show that responsive parenting (4.46), balanced nutrition (4.33), and children's independence (4.25) fall into the high category. Strong positive correlations were found between responsive parenting and independence ($r = 0.71$), balanced nutrition and independence ($r = 0.76$), as well as between parenting and nutrition ($r = 0.77$). Anthropometric measurements also indicate that most children fall within the normal growth range. These findings confirm that responsive parenting and balanced nutrition significantly contribute to enhancing children's independence and reducing the risk of stunting.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Responsive Parenting, Balanced Nutrition, Children's Independence, Stunting, Early Childhood</p>
	<p>Abstrak</p> <p>Pola asuh responsif dan nutrisi seimbang merupakan faktor penting bagi tumbuh kembang holistik anak usia dini. Penelitian ini menganalisis pengaruh kedua faktor tersebut terhadap kemandirian anak dan pencegahan stunting melalui pendekatan kuantitatif korelasional pada 46 orang tua di KB RA Mina Jadid, Mojokerto. Data diperoleh melalui angket skala Likert dan dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif serta korelasi Pearson. Hasil menunjukkan skor pola asuh responsif (4,46), nutrisi seimbang (4,33), dan kemandirian anak (4,25) berada pada kategori tinggi. Terdapat korelasi positif yang kuat antara pola asuh dan kemandirian anak ($r = 0,71$), nutrisi dan kemandirian ($r = 0,76$), serta pola asuh dan nutrisi ($r = 0,77$). Data antropometri juga menunjukkan mayoritas anak berada dalam rentang pertumbuhan normal. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pola asuh responsif dan nutrisi seimbang berkontribusi signifikan dalam meningkatkan kemandirian sekaligus menurunkan risiko stunting pada anak usia dini.</p> <p>Kata Kunci: Pola Asuh Responsif, Nutrisi Seimbang, Kemandirian Anak, Stunting, Anak Usia Dini</p>

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period that determines the quality of a child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Sabiela et al., 2022; Warmansyah & Amalina, 2019; Wulandari et al., 2024; Yuningsih et al., 2024). Two major factors that strongly influence this phase are parental caregiving and nutritional intake (Ailah et al., 2025; Churiyah & Hasibuan, 2025; Maromi & Hasibuan, 2025). Appropriate parenting practices combined with adequate nutrition not only support optimal growth but also form the foundation for preventing stunting and fostering independence from an early age. Loo et al., (2025) In this context, parenting and nutrition should not be viewed as separate elements but as interrelated components that jointly contribute to holistic child development.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development highlights that during early childhood (the preoperational stage), children begin to actively use symbols and language and demonstrate rapid growth in imaginative thinking and social roles (Piaget, 1976). However, such development is highly dependent on environmental stimulation and direct experiences, particularly through interactions with parents and primary caregivers (de Onis & Branca, 2016; Pino-Pasternak & Whitebread, 2010). Emotional support, opportunities for exploration, and age-appropriate responsibilities are therefore essential in promoting independent behavior and decision-making skills.

Responsive parenting is characterized by parental sensitivity to a child's needs, emotional support, and consistent, prompt responses to children's behaviors. Anjani et al., (2024) This aligns with Baumrind's concept of authoritative parenting, which combines emotional warmth with developmentally appropriate expectations. Such parenting practices have been shown to foster independent, confident, and self-regulated children (Laila et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2023). In early childhood education, responsive parenting not only influences emotional and social development but also supports children's independence in daily activities.

Balanced nutrition, on the other hand, is a fundamental requirement for preventing stunting, which remains a significant public health challenge in Indonesia (Engle et al., 1999). Haselow et al., (2016) defines stunting as long-term growth impairment resulting from chronic undernutrition, particularly within the first 1,000 days of life. Children who experience stunting are at risk of cognitive delays, learning difficulties, and limited social interaction (Trisnawati et al., 2025). This demonstrates that appropriate nutrition is not merely associated with height outcomes but also with cognitive readiness, emotional stability, and a child's ability to develop independence (Jirout et al., 2019; Landry et al., 2008).

Laila et al.,(2025) emphasize that adequate nutrition must be integrated with empathetic and responsive caregiving to ensure optimal growth in all developmental domains. They argue that balanced nutrition and active parental involvement serve as key components in long-term stunting prevention in early childhood (Nix et al., 2021). Their findings indicate that nutritional interventions alone are not sufficient without parenting practices that foster independence, confidence, and meaningful participation in everyday activities (Mäkelä et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2020).

Research within the past five years further reinforces this perspective. Patrick & Nicklas, (2005) reports that effective nutritional parenting significantly reduces stunting risk, especially when parents consistently apply balanced nutrition principles at home. Black & Dewey, (2014) found that appropriate parenting combined with parental nutrition education positively influences children's social and cognitive development, including increased independence in daily tasks and exploratory behaviors. These studies suggest that the combination of parenting quality and nutrition plays a crucial role in shaping early developmental outcomes.

Nevertheless, the relationship between caregiving, nutrition, and child development in real-life settings is not always linear (Hidayat et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2025). Some studies show that even when parents demonstrate positive caregiving practices and adequate nutritional provision, children's independence does not always increase proportionally due to environmental, cultural, and educational factors (Churiyah & Hasibuan, 2025; Imara et al., 2024; Nafisah et al., 2023; Nurfahma et al., 2024). Conversely, emotional independence and practical independence often interact dynamically, reflecting the multidimensional nature of child development (Balantekin et al., 2020). These conditions highlight the need for empirical studies that specifically examine the interconnected roles of responsive parenting, balanced nutrition, child independence, and stunting prevention within one integrated analytical framework.

Building on this, the present study aims to analyze the influence of responsive parenting and balanced nutrition on children's independence and stunting prevention, conducted at Raudhatul Athfal Mina Jadid Early Childhood Playgroup, Mojoanyar District, Mojokerto Regency. Through a quantitative correlational approach, this study seeks to provide comprehensive empirical evidence on how the combination of parenting and nutrition contributes to enhancing independence while reducing stunting risk among early childhood populations.

METHODS

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a quantitative approach with a correlational research design. This approach is used to examine the relationship and influence between responsive parenting and balanced nutrition (independent variables) on children's independence and stunting prevention (dependent variables). The primary aim of this design is to identify the strength and direction of relationships among variables within a specific population.

Research Location and Subjects

The study was conducted at Raudhatul Athfal Mina Jadid Early Childhood Playgroup, located in Mojoanyar District, Mojokerto Regency. The research subjects were parents or guardians of early childhood students enrolled at the institution. A saturated sampling technique was used, meaning that the entire accessible population was included as the sample due to its manageable size. The total sample consisted of 46 respondents.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire constructed based on three main constructs: (1) Responsive Parenting (items 7–14); (2) Balanced Nutrition and Nutritional Awareness (items 15–24); and (3) Early Childhood Development and Independence (items 25–34). Each item provided five response options (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). In addition to the questionnaire, anthropometric data children's weight and height were collected to identify stunting risk according to WHO standards.

The instrument was validated by early childhood education experts and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding coefficients above 0.7, indicating high reliability.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected by distributing the questionnaires directly to parents. Prior to completion, respondents were given an explanation of the research purpose and assured of data confidentiality. Children's weight and height data were also recorded based on the KIA (Maternal and Child Health) book or the most recent measurements provided by the parents.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive analysis was used to determine the mean scores for each indicator of parenting style, nutrition, and child development. Inferential analysis employed the Pearson Product Moment correlation test to examine the relationships between responsive parenting, balanced nutrition, children's independence, and nutritional status. Additionally, anthropometric data were analyzed by comparing children's weight and height with WHO Z-score standards to detect potential stunting risk.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aimed to examine the influence of responsive parenting and balanced nutrition on children's independence and stunting prevention in early childhood. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment correlation, and growth status interpretation based on WHO Z-score standards. The findings are presented as follows.

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the overall tendencies of parenting practices, nutritional fulfillment, and children's independence based on the questionnaire responses from 46 parents. The average scores for each variable were: 1) Responsive Parenting: 4.46 (very good category); 2) Balanced Nutrition: 4.33 (good category); 3) Children's Independence: 4.25 (good category)

These findings indicate that most parents demonstrated warm, supportive, and consistent caregiving practices. They also showed strong attention to nutritional adequacy, such as providing varied foods, maintaining regular meal schedules, and limiting unhealthy snacks. Children raised under these conditions showed positive indicators of independence, including self-help skills, initiative, and well-developed motor and social abilities.

Inferential Correlation Analysis

Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the studied variables. The results are presented below:

Table 1. Correlation Among Variables

Variables	Responsive Parenting	Balanced Nutrition	Children's Independence
Responsive Parenting	1.00	0.77	0.71
Balanced Nutrition	0.77	1.00	0.76
Children's Independence	0.71	0.76	1.00

The correlation analysis presented in Table 1 demonstrates strong and positive associations among all variables examined in this study. Responsive parenting shows a substantial relationship with children's independence ($r = 0.71$), indicating that children who receive warm, consistent, and supportive caregiving tend to develop higher levels of autonomy. Similarly, balanced nutrition also exhibits a strong correlation with children's independence ($r = 0.76$), suggesting that adequate dietary intake contributes to children being healthier, more active, and better able to manage daily tasks independently. In addition, the correlation between responsive parenting and balanced nutrition ($r = 0.77$) reveals that parents who apply nurturing and emotionally supportive caregiving patterns are also more likely to provide structured and nutritious eating practices at home. Collectively, these findings highlight that the interplay between parenting quality and nutritional adequacy forms an important foundation for promoting independence and healthy development among early childhood populations.

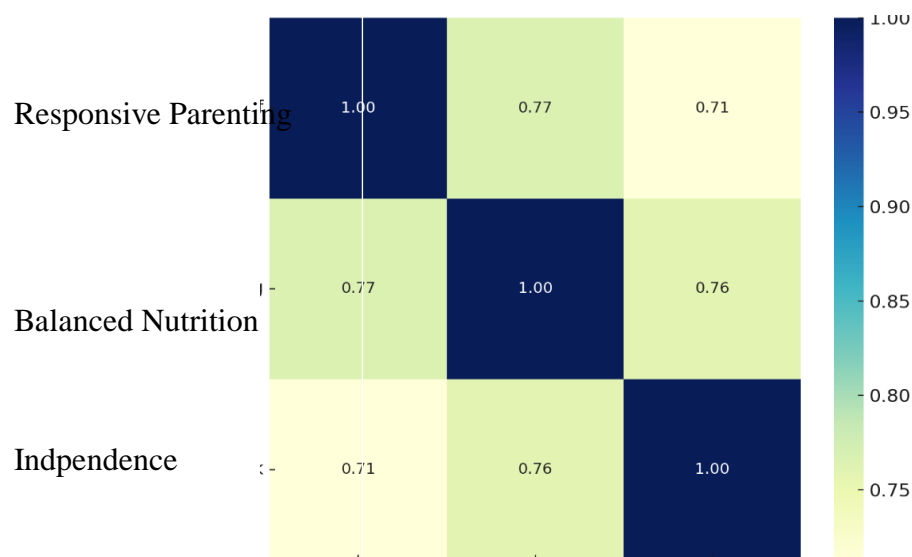


Figure 1. Correlation Heatmap

The correlation heatmap illustrated in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the strength and direction of relationships among the variables examined in this study. The darker blue shading indicates correlations above 0.70, reflecting strong positive associations between responsive parenting, balanced nutrition, and children's independence. This visual pattern confirms that all variables are closely interconnected, with higher intensity colors highlighting the strongest relationships. Overall, the heatmap reinforces the statistical results by showing that improvements in parenting responsiveness and nutritional quality tend to coincide with higher levels of independence in early childhood.

Analysis of Nutritional Status

In addition to questionnaires, anthropometric data height and weight were obtained from parental reports and cross-referenced with WHO Child Growth Standards. The descriptive data show that most children fall within the normal growth range for their age, with healthy appetite, adequate physical activity, and minimal illness episodes. These findings suggest that balanced nutritional practices within the household play a significant role in preventing stunting.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the significant role of responsive parenting in fostering children's independence. The strong correlation between responsive parenting and independence ($r = 0.71$) aligns with Baumrind's authoritative parenting framework, which posits that warmth and structure support the development of autonomy and self-regulation (Garner, 2000). These results are consistent with recent studies showing that responsive parenting enhances emotional regulation, initiative, and problem-solving abilities in young children (Stewart et al., 2013). Kim et al., (2019) found that parental sensitivity and contingent responses significantly predict children's independence in daily routines,

demonstrating that responsive interaction patterns create secure environments for exploration and self-directed behavior.

The study also found a strong relationship between balanced nutrition and children's independence ($r = 0.76$). Adequate nutrition supports cognitive development, attention span, and physical stamina, all of which contribute to greater independence in early childhood tasks. These findings align with Engle & Ricciuti (1995) who reported that micronutrient sufficiency improves executive functioning, who found that nutritional adequacy enhances learning readiness and social engagement. Furthermore, studies by Miller et al., (2016) highlight that children with balanced diets show better self-regulation and task persistence, reinforcing the link between nutrition and independence observed in this study.

The correlation between responsive parenting and balanced nutrition ($r = 0.77$) suggests that caregiving and nutritional practices coexist within family behavior patterns. This finding is supported by research indicating that emotionally supportive parents are more likely to adopt structured and health-conscious feeding practices (Pristiwanti et al., 2023; Awofala & Bilikis, 2024). Families who demonstrate warmth and involvement tend to maintain consistent mealtime routines and monitor children's dietary quality, which contributes to both independence and healthy growth outcomes.

From a public health perspective, the nutritional status findings reinforce the importance of integrating responsive caregiving with balanced nutrition for stunting prevention. Erlina et al., (2024) emphasizes that optimal child development requires both adequate nutrient intake and responsive interactions that stimulate cognitive and socio-emotional growth. The normal growth trends identified in this study, supported by adequate nutrition and positive parenting, align with Haselow et al., (2016), who found that harmonized caregiving-nutritional environments substantially reduce the risk of stunting. These results further confirm that preventing stunting requires not only food adequacy but also supportive interpersonal environments that enable optimal child development (Stewart et al., 2013).

Overall, the study reveals that child development is multidimensional, where emotional support, nutritional quality, and daily routines interact to shape independence and growth outcomes. The strong interrelationships among variables underscore the necessity for integrated programs that simultaneously strengthen parenting skills and nutritional awareness (Nurtaniawati, 2019; Prasetyo et al., 2023). This study contributes empirical evidence demonstrating that responsive parenting and balanced nutrition, when practiced together, form a powerful foundation for promoting independence and preventing early stunting.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that responsive parenting practices among parents are generally in the very good category, reflected through warm communication, praise, and opportunities for children to participate in simple decision-making. Balanced nutrition is also well-fulfilled, as shown through diverse healthy food choices, regular eating patterns, and limited consumption of unhealthy foods, which collectively support normal growth status and a low risk of stunting. Children in this study showed a good level of independence in motor, emotional, and daily self-help activities. Strong positive correlations

were found between responsive parenting and children's independence ($r = 0.71$), as well as between balanced nutrition and independence ($r = 0.76$), indicating that supportive caregiving and adequate nutrition significantly contribute to children's autonomy and overall development. Responsive parenting and balanced nutrition were also closely related ($r = 0.77$), suggesting that parents who nurture responsively tend to also adopt better nutritional practices at home. Overall, this study concludes that the combination of responsive parenting and balanced nutrition plays a crucial role in fostering early childhood independence while simultaneously serving as an effective strategy for reducing the risk of stunting within family and early childhood education settings.

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