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Management of a Vegetable Feeding Program to Prevent Picky Eating in Early Childhood

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Abstract

The problem of picky eaters in early childhood is a challenge that can have an impact on optimal growth and development of children. Children who only like certain types of food have the potential to be deficient in essential nutrients. This study aims to describe the management of the vegetable eating habit program at Diponegoro Kindergarten 118 Bentul Kebasen as an effort to prevent picky eater behavior. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews. The results of the collection show that the implementation of the vegetable eating habituation program has been going on for five years with full support from schools, teachers and parents of students. This program is carried out every day by involving students to get used to consuming vegetables.

Keywords: *Management, Eating Vegetables, Early Childhood Picky Eaters.*

INTRODUCTION

Young children begin practicing to improve their fundamental skills, including their eating abilities. At this stage, they start to develop food preferences—identifying what they like and dislike—and gain independence in eating. A common concern among parents is a decrease in appetite compared to infancy. Children may also exhibit "picky eating" behaviors, such as being selective about food, eating slowly, becoming fussy during meals, and feeling full quickly. If these issues are not addressed early on, they can lead to persistent eating problems that make the act of eating difficult (Mulianah et al., 2024).

Picky eating can negatively impact a child's growth and development. Children who frequently exhibit this behavior often fail to obtain the nutrients necessary to sustain healthy growth and development. By consuming only a limited range of foods, they may miss out on essential nutrients—such as vitamins, minerals, and protein—that are vital for bone formation, immune system function, and brain and cognitive development. Nutritional deficiencies resulting from such a restricted diet can lead to health issues, including stunted growth and a weakened immune system. Picky eating can also increase

anxiety or stress in children, particularly if this unbalanced diet persists over an extended period (Sakinah et al., 2025). It is crucial to gradually introduce a variety of healthy foods to young children.

One way to address children's eating issues is to identify the root cause of the problem and tackle it directly. If left unaddressed, these issues can escalate into persistent feeding difficulties or picky eating habits. Parental involvement is essential to prevent such problems; for instance, parents can offer appealing meals to keep the child interested, limit the purchase of snacks, and avoid giving snacks that fill the child up before main meals. Additionally, providing nutritious food is vital to meeting the child's nutritional needs (Mauludi et al., 2024).

Low food intake can have both short- and long-term consequences; this situation is particularly concerning given that the 4–6 age range is a golden period for a child's growth. During this time, the child's brain undergoes rapid development and requires adequate nutritional intake to support optimal growth (Bakrisuk & Hasibuan, n.d.). To address this issue, the researcher adopted a program aimed at preventing picky eating habits—specifically, fostering a routine of vegetable consumption—with the expectation that it would provide the essential nutrients required by young children.

Vegetables are rich in vitamins and minerals that have a highly positive impact on health and overall growth and development. Although the body's quantitative requirement for them is relatively low, the functions performed by vitamins and minerals are virtually irreplaceable, making it crucial to ensure adequate intake. A child's growth and development depend on a balanced diet to ensure proper bodily development and the formation of strong, healthy muscles and bones. Consuming foods rich in dietary fiber is highly beneficial, as it accelerates digestion, influences weight gain, softens stool, and promotes healthy growth and development in children (Asqia et al., 2024). It turns out that children are less fond of vegetables due to their bitter and sour taste, as well as their unappealing appearance and color, which diminish children's appetites and their interest in the vegetables (Vega, 2024).

Habituating toddlers to consume appropriate, high-quality vegetables is a crucial step in meeting their nutritional needs. These supplementary foods are designed to complement nutritional intake that may not be fully met through daily meals. Providing such supplements can significantly improve nutritional status, thereby positively influencing a child's growth and development—such as gains in weight and height (Emmaria et al., 2024).

A vegetable-focused feeding program was implemented for young children because teachers wanted them to eat vegetables and avoid becoming picky eaters. At TK Diponegoro 118 Bentul in Kebasen District, Banyumas Regency, there were children who initially refused to eat vegetables at all; however, thanks to the school's program, they gradually became willing to eat vegetables and stopped being selective about their food. This process unfolded in stages: starting with simple exposure, the children began to handle the vegetables or even taste small amounts to discover the flavor, eventually learning to eat vegetables on a daily basis. Research conducted by Salma Sakinah (Sakinah et al., 2025) states that the factors influencing the development of picky eating include genetic factors, whereby children whose parents have selective eating habits are more prone to developing similar behavior. Another study conducted by Mei Dwi Sartika (Sartika et al., 2022) states that vegetables are highly beneficial for a child's development. Both studies address the issue of picky eating and the importance of vegetable consumption for young children.

This article aims to provide strategies for teachers and parents to address the issue of "picky eating" in young children who are reluctant to eat vegetables. It is hoped that the article will offer solutions to improve children's nutritional quality and mitigate the negative effects of unhealthy eating habits.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is an approach in which findings are not derived from statistical procedures or calculations; instead, the findings emerge from data collected through various means, such as observation and interviews (Sulistiyo, 2019). The researcher collected data in the form of words and images rather than numerical figures, in accordance with the qualitative methodology employed. The study was conducted at TK Diponegoro 118 Bentul Kebasen (Kebasen District, Banyumas Regency), with "Class B" children serving as the research subjects. Data analysis was performed using data reduction techniques. This specific kindergarten was selected because it had already implemented a vegetable-eating program. Data collection involved observation and in-depth interviews, with the researcher acting as a full observer and focusing on the collection and analysis of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

a. Planning

The Vegetable-Eating Habituation Program at TK Diponegoro 118 Bentul Kebasen was initiated following a comparative study visit to another school that had already implemented such a program. Fundamentally, the purpose of this comparative study was to gather accurate information and data regarding the vegetable-eating habituation activities. The targets for the program included: first, understanding the processes and outcomes of the vegetable-eating habituation program; second, identifying the data required to run the program, including strategies for resolving issues encountered during implementation; and third, obtaining implementation reports from each teacher to assess the program's achievements.

Following the comparative study, the school principal consulted with the teachers to schedule the vegetable-eating habituation program. The principal directed that a meeting be held with parents to determine whether they approved of the program; the parents subsequently gave their consent. The program was scheduled to take place daily, from Monday through Saturday.

Regarding the program strategy, once the parents had agreed to the initiative, the principal, teachers, and parents collaborated to determine the menu and pricing. Given that TK Diponegoro 118 Kebasen is located in a rural area, some parents contributed by providing rice or vegetables. Food preparation took place in the school kitchen, with cooking duties handled by teachers designated by the principal.

b. Organization

Several parties are involved in the implementation of the "Vegetable Eating Habit" program, including the school principal, teachers, and parents. As the highest-ranking leader at the kindergarten, the principal plays a strategic role in organization; they determine the policy and decision to implement the vegetable-feeding program and bear responsibility for the program's overall planning. The principal also forms an implementation team for the program, consisting of teachers and parents.

Teachers serve on the front lines of the supplementary feeding program; they are able to observe children who are less active, frequently ill, or appear malnourished. Regarding the implementation of the vegetable-feeding habit, teachers are directly responsible for the process of serving food to children in the classroom according to the established schedule, ensuring that the children consume the provided food properly and hygienically. Teachers also play a role in educating children about the importance of nutritious food through storytelling or simple activities, helping them recognize healthy food types and understand the importance of washing hands before eating. Furthermore, teachers consistently record the children's responses to the food and report any issues or obstacles encountered to the principal.

Parental involvement is crucial for the success of the "Vegetable Eating Habit" program at TK Diponegoro 118 Bentul Kebasen. Parents provide honest information to teachers or the school regarding their child's health history—such as allergies or eating habits at home—so that the supplementary feeding program can be appropriately tailored. Additionally, parents monitor their child's health status and growth at home and report any significant changes to the teachers or school authorities.

c. Implementation

The vegetable-eating program aimed at preventing picky eating habits was launched five years ago and continues to operate today. This initiative aligns with the consensus among all stakeholders—including the school administration, teachers, and parents—to foster a habit of vegetable consumption at TK Diponegoro 118, thereby preventing picky eating in young children and ensuring the delivery of high-quality early childhood education.

The Kindergarten Principal leads the implementation of the vegetable-eating program at TK Diponegoro 118 in Bentul, Kebasen. The Principal reports that the program is proceeding according to expectations. Key indicators of this success include: (1) maintaining records on individual student issues that might hinder the achievement of quality standards; (2) collaborative discussions among the principal, teachers, and parents regarding the program's progress and any challenges faced by the children; and (3) the consistent execution of the program, facilitated by effective coordination between the school and parents.

The vegetable-eating program takes place daily during the scheduled break time. The procedure involves the following steps: (1) children enter the designated room; (2) children are accustomed to washing their hands before eating; (3) children learn to queue to collect a pre-prepared portion of food; (4) children sit down and recite a prayer before eating; and (5) after the meal, children are accustomed to reciting a prayer of gratitude and placing their used food containers in one of three designated collection points.

While some children remain picky eaters and initially refuse to eat vegetables, the teachers' efforts to guide and introduce vegetables to them have led to progress; children who previously refused vegetables entirely have eventually become willing to eat the prepared dishes. Although persuading or guiding children to eat vegetables requires time and effort, educators play a crucial role in preventing picky eating habits.

d. Control

Based on the research findings, the measures taken by the school principal to ensure the smooth implementation of the "Vegetable Eating Habit" program are as

follows: (1) teachers monitor the program's implementation; (2) teachers avoid punishing children who do not finish their meals; and (3) teachers evaluate the program in collaboration with all relevant parties—the principal, teachers, and parents.

When the program does not proceed as expected, the principal, teachers, and parents hold meetings to discuss the situation and seek solutions. For instance, there was a child who refused to eat rice entirely; the teacher and parents could not force the issue, as the child had never eaten rice—consuming only side dishes and milk daily—and preferred potatoes as a substitute. This issue was discussed, and a solution was reached with the child's parents.

Supporting factors for the program's implementation include: First, a shared understanding between the school and parents; Second, strong parental support, noting that while children might resist eating vegetables at home, they are willing to do so at school; Third, financial support and contributions of raw ingredients from parents; and Fourth, parents feeling more at ease knowing their children are not buying snacks indiscriminately outside the school.

Inhibiting factors include: First, time constraints in guiding children who have already become picky eaters; Second, dealing with children who have irregular appetites; and Third, a fear of vegetables. To address these obstacles, the principal, teachers, and parents must collaborate to find solutions.

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of a vegetable-feeding program can prevent picky eating habits in early childhood. The practice of vegetable consumption has been ongoing for five years with full support from the school, teachers, and parents. The program is implemented daily, actively involving students to help them cultivate the habit of eating vegetables. After five years, the program continues because it has proven effective in preventing picky eating. This demonstrates that the initiative to foster vegetable-eating habits has been consistently implemented within the educational setting over this period. The program operates daily, directly involving children in the act of eating vegetables. Its implementation has evolved beyond mere food consumption into an integrated habit-forming practice within the children's daily school lives.

The program's five-year continuity reflects consistency and strong acceptance within the educational ecosystem. Support from schools, teachers, and parents ensures that the habit of eating vegetables is not limited to school activities but is reinforced within the family environment. This support serves as a crucial factor in sustaining the program.

Observations of the program's implementation reveal a positive trend regarding children's acceptance of vegetables. Children who regularly experience eating vegetables have greater opportunities to recognize, taste, and familiarize themselves with a variety of foods. This factor is identified as instrumental in preventing picky eating tendencies in early childhood.

Research findings also indicate that the program's success depends not merely on the provision of vegetables, but on the consistency of repeated practices. Thus, the mechanism of habit formation emerges as a crucial aspect in understanding the program's success. The daily repetition of vegetable-eating activities provides children with a relatively consistent experience, thereby integrating vegetable consumption into their routine.

From the perspective of the educational ecosystem, the involvement of schools, teachers, and parents reinforces the program's sustainability. Teachers play a role in

establishing routines and guiding the children; schools provide the systems necessary for the program's ongoing implementation; and parents support the development of their children's eating habits. Consequently, the program can be understood as an environment-based intervention involving multiple educational stakeholders.

Overall, the research results suggest that a routine and sustained vegetable-eating habituation program has the potential to help prevent picky eating in early childhood. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution, as the available data do not yet provide quantitative measurements regarding changes in picky eating levels before and after the program. Therefore, the results are best understood as an indication of the program's contribution to fostering healthy eating habits and preventing tendencies toward picky eating, rather than as proof of a statistical cause-and-effect relationship.

Discussion

A comparative study is an activity undertaken to broaden perspectives and acquire knowledge that can be applied to achieve future improvements. Such activities are undoubtedly beneficial for fostering the desired development and meeting specific needs. In essence, comparative studies serve a highly positive purpose. Insights gained from visiting institutions or regions that possess adoptable positive practices should inform policy formulation, evaluation, and refinement. Ultimately, the findings from these studies must serve as a learning resource to enhance performance and improve the processes and outcomes achieved to date (Purwanto, 2022). The findings from the comparative study will be discussed upon returning to the institution to determine whether the vegetable-eating program should also be implemented at TK Diponegoro 118 Bentul Kebasen. Once the decision is made, the next step involves planning a meeting with parents or guardians to gauge their agreement on introducing a program that fosters the habit of eating vegetables, with the aim of preventing picky eating in young children.

Planning constitutes the first and most crucial step in educational management. This step involves establishing goals, strategies, and the actions required to achieve those goals. Effective planning must take into account various factors, such as student needs, available resources, and environmental conditions (Sanyata et al., 2024).

The implementation of the vegetable-based feeding program is heavily influenced by the principal's leadership. As a leader, the principal is expected to participate in school programs, demonstrating a commitment to the advancement and improvement of education within the school. The principal's responsibilities encompass core managerial duties, the development of entrepreneurial initiatives, and the supervision of teachers and educational staff to enhance the quality of the school. In leading the educational institution, the principal must strive to foster a welcoming learning environment, plan and execute effective and efficient learning programs, improve the quality of teaching through creative, innovative, and technology-based approaches, and consistently involve parents or guardians as partners and learning resources within the school (Musa et al., 2022).

For young children, the teacher's role is essential in providing a behavioral model; this role encompasses the positive behaviors teachers demonstrate to optimize a child's skills, talents, interests, and potential, thereby fostering the development of individuals with strong character and high achievement (Wardani et al., 2021).

Parents must be precise and meticulous in managing their child's diet, taking into account the child's health and physical condition. When serving food to young children, parents need to pay attention to both quality and quantity. Regarding quality, the food

must be hygienic, as young children are highly susceptible to illness. Regarding quantity, the portions served should be smaller. When a child receives the right food, their bodily functions operate optimally, leading to good health and a strong immune system (Maulidia et al., 2022).

Organizing entails the detailed division of tasks, authority, and responsibilities based on specific areas and the limits of that authority. In a school setting, this can be implemented by forming a leadership team, assigning tasks, establishing fair and efficient schedules, and delegating responsibilities—such as serving as a coordinator for student activities. An educational institution functions effectively when all members of the organization collaborate well (Faiz et al., 2024).

Picky eating—or the behavior of being selective about food—is frequently observed during a child's developmental years, though it typically does not last long (Hijja & Kurniawan, 2022). A child is said to be a picky eater if he has characteristics such as refusing newly introduced food, covering his mouth, and even vomiting food (Anggreni et al., 2023). The implementation of this vegetable eating program is carried out every day, with predetermined steps. In carrying out this activity for children's growth and development, teachers will prepare and create children's menus themselves so that children are interested and voracious when eating the menu that has been prepared by the teacher, eating food that has been prepared by the teacher and also inviting children to chat first about the benefits contained in the food that has been served. By explaining the advantages or goodness of eating nutritious food and the consequences (Lina et al., 2024).

Low vegetable consumption among children stems from a lack of knowledge and a disregard for the importance of eating vegetables. Ineffective early childhood nutrition education results in insufficient knowledge regarding healthy and balanced dietary habits in adulthood, leading to poor dietary behaviors. These issues can have adverse effects on a child's growth and development (Cendekia et al., 2024)

The control process involves efforts to provide guidance and make corrections to ensure the organization's quality is maintained. Organizational control aims to create an environment conducive to achieving goals effectively and efficiently (Handini et al., 2024). Feeding difficulties can stem from internal factors—such as digestive issues or oral or dental problems—and psychological factors, including strict mealtime rules, parental imposition of will, or family disharmony. Other contributing factors include food preferences and habits—such as a child becoming bored with the food served or desiring constantly changing menus—as well as environmental influences; for instance, if parents are reluctant to eat, the child may also become reluctant. Additionally, a child might be so engrossed in play that they frequently forget about mealtime (Heriyanti et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the vegetable habituation program at Kindergarten Diponegoro 118 Bentul Kebasen is an effective form of intervention to prevent picky eater behavior in early childhood. This program is implemented in a structured manner through the stages of planning, organizing, implementing and controlling involving school principals, teachers and student guardians. The success of this program is supported by solid cooperation between the school and parents, as well as the active participation of teachers in educating children about the importance of consuming vegetables. Even though there are several obstacles such as the habit of picky eaters that have been formed and the irregularity of children's

appetites, with a patient and consistent approach this program is able to increase children's awareness of consuming vegetables. This program can be a model that can be applied in other early childhood education institutions to support optimal growth and development of children.

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