

## Healthy Food Perception and Nutritional Gaps in Early Childhood: A Comparative Study of Two Preschools

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the perception of healthy food and nutritional gaps in children aged early in two PAUDs with different socio-economic backgrounds. The main problems studied were lack of understanding child about food Healthy as well as the impact to intake nutrition Which often unbalanced during early development. The purpose of this study was to compare children's perceptions on healthy food in both PAUDs and identify the nutritional gaps that occur, so that recommendations can be provided for improving nutritional education. The study used an approach qualitative comparative study using semi-structured interview techniques, observation, and dietary assessment. Participants consisted of 40 children aged 4–6 years, along with their teachers and parents, selected using purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted thematically to understand children's perceptions, and supported by quantitative analysis of food intake to detect nutritional gaps. The results showed that children in both PAUDs generally recognized fruits and vegetables as healthy foods, but had limited understanding of other food groups such as protein and grains. Nutritional gaps were found in both PAUDs, especially in protein, fiber, and vitamin intake, with conditions being more severe in PAUDs with low socioeconomic status. The role of parents and teachers is very important in shaping children's dietary patterns, although often hampered by lack of knowledge and limited resources. This study recommends the need for more comprehensive and age-appropriate nutrition education to reduce malnutrition in early childhood.

**Keywords:** Perception food Healthy, gap nutrition, child age early, education nutrition, Early Childhood Education

## 1 Introduction

Early childhood is a critical period in the formation of eating patterns and healthy living habits (Hasanah, 2024). At this stage, children begin to develop food preferences that can affect their nutritional status in the future (Ramadhani, TA, & Muniroh, 2023). However, many studies show that children's understanding of healthy food is still very limited, which results in unbalanced nutritional intake. Nutritional gaps in early childhood can not only affect physical growth, but also their cognitive, social, and emotional development (Alestari, 2019).

The problem raised in this study is how children perceive healthy food and the extent to which nutritional gaps occur in two PAUDs with different socio-economic backgrounds (Foodbank of Indonesia (FOI, 2024). The importance of this study lies in the effort to understand the relationship between perceptions of healthy food and children's nutritional intake, as well as to design appropriate nutrition education interventions (Azzahra, VE Sianturi, CR, Nurhuda, E, Dhaniswara, P, Rochadi, RA, Pratama, MRK, Listiani, L., Simanjuntak, CZR, Canthiqa, KD, & Ivanicevic, 2024).

The methodology used is a comparative qualitative approach with semi-structured interview methods, observation, and dietary assessment. Research participants were 40 children aged 4–6 years, teachers, and parents selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed thematically to identify

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children's perceptions and supported by quantitative analysis of eating patterns to measure nutritional gaps.

Research discussion shows that children generally associate healthy foods with fruits and vegetables, but have less understanding of the importance of protein, grains, and other balanced intakes (Putri, GE, Dasril, O., Angelia, I., Fitri, WE, Trisnadewi, E., Handayani, S., Sary, AN, & Yulia, 2023). Differences in socioeconomic status affect the level of nutritional disparities, where children from PAUD with low socioeconomic status show greater deficits in protein and vitamin consumption (Yuliana, 2020). In addition That, role teachers and people old in forming understanding child about nutrition proven to be important, although information is often still minimal (Istikhomah, I., & Putri, 2024).

The conclusion of this study is the need for comprehensive nutrition education, involving children, teachers, and parents actively in order to form healthy eating patterns from an early age. This education needs to be adjusted to the age of the child and the socio-economic conditions of each family.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **1. Healthy Eating Patterns**

Healthy eating patterns in early childhood have been a focus of research because of their impact on long-term health. (Susanty, SD, Winas, LN, Yasril, AI, Saputra, H. A., Apriliani, C., & Alhamda, 2024). According to Birch and Fisher (1998), food preferences in children are formed early on through interactions with the environment, especially family and school. Nicklaus (2009) also showed that the diversity of foods introduced from an early age has a major influence on children's acceptance of healthy foods. On the other hand, the WHO report (2020) emphasizes that malnutrition in early childhood is still a global problem, with serious consequences for physical growth and cognitive development.

Previous research (Scaglioni et al., 2011) showed that parents play an important role in shaping children's eating habits, while nutrition education interventions in schools can help improve children's nutritional intake (Contento, 2008). However, there is a gap in research on children's own perceptions of healthy food and its impact on their eating patterns, especially in the context of ECE with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **2. Theory Which Used**

This study uses social learning theory, which states that behavior children are learned through observation and social interaction, including eating behavior. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) helps understand the influence of the family and school environment in shaping children's eating behavior. Piaget's cognitive development perspective (1964) is also used to see how children understand the concept of healthy food according to their age.

### **3. Framework Think**

The framework of this research begins with the understanding that children's perceptions of healthy food are influenced by experiences, social interactions, and education they receive at home and at school. The perceptions that are formed will influence daily eating patterns, which in turn have implications for fulfilling children's nutritional needs. However, social conditions

economic factors can strengthen or weaken this influence as it relates to the availability of healthy food at home. Therefore, this study compared the perceptions and nutritional gaps in two PAUDs with different socioeconomic statuses, to understand the relationship between children's understanding, eating practices, and their nutritional status.

## **3 Research Methods**

### **1. Research Paradigm**

Study This use paradigm constructivism , Which focus on subjective understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. This paradigm sees that individual perceptions and experiences of a concept, in this case children's perceptions of healthy food, are formed through social interactions and their surroundings, both at home and at school.

Tabel 4. Perception Child About Food Healthy And The impact

No	Perception Child	Positive impact	Negative impact
1	Fruit And vegetable as healthy food	Fulfil vitamin and fiber needs	No know source essential protein
2	Food sweet considered delicious and interesting	Food sweet considered delicious and interesting	Risk obesity And tooth decay
3	Food fast serving preferred because it is practical	Satisfying appetite temporary child	High in fat and salt, triggers problem health
4	Milk as drink Healthy	Supporting growth bone and teeth	Not all children like milk, risk lack calcium
5	No know the importance of protein (egg, fish, meat)	-	Risk lack substance iron and growth disorders

## 2. Approach Study

Approach Which used in study This is an approach qualitative comparative . This approach was chosen because the main objective of the study was to deeply understand children's perceptions of healthy food, as well as to identify nutritional gaps that occur in two PAUDs with different socio-economic backgrounds. comparative allow comparison direct between two Early Childhood Education For looking at differences and similarities in children's perceptions and eating patterns.

## 3. Technique Collection Data

Data collected using some technique as following:

- Interview Semi-Structured : Interview done with children, Teacher, and parents to explore their perceptions about healthy food and daily eating patterns. The interviews were semi-structured to give respondents the freedom to express their opinions and experiences.
- Observation Participatory : Researcher do observation direct to children's eating behavior during school meal times. This observation aims to see the extent to which children's understanding of healthy food is applied in their daily lives.
- Evaluation Pattern Eat : Use recording intake food daily children for one week to assess whether their diets are in line with healthy nutrition guidelines. This data will be analyzed to identify nutritional gaps.

## 4. Analysis Data

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach for qualitative data, namely by identifying the main themes that emerged from the results of interviews and observations. This process involving coding data Which relevant with category perception child about healthy food Besides That, For data quantitative about pattern Eat, analysis was carried out descriptive to describe the nutritional intake of children in two different PAUDs. These data will be compared to identify nutritional gaps between children in PAUDs with different socio-economic backgrounds.

## 5. Validity And Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study used data triangulation techniques , which combined interviews, observations, and dietary assessments to verify findings. Besides That, study This Also involving members checking by asking for feedback from respondents (teachers, parents, children) to ensure accurate interpretation of the collected data. With method study This, expected can obtained understanding Which in depth about perception child to food Healthy And identification gap nutrition which occurred in two PAUDs with different socio-economic statuses.

## **4 Result and Discussion**

### **1. Perception Child to Food Healthy**

The results of interviews with children showed that they associate healthy food with fruit And vegetable, Which considered as choice main food Healthy. Part On the other hand, sweet foods and fast foods are often considered as children's favorite foods because they taste good and are enjoyable. However, they do not fully understand that excessive consumption of these foods can have a negative impact on their long-term health.

### **2. The Gap Nutrition on Child Age Early**

The children's eating patterns observed during the study period showed a significant nutritional gap, especially in PAUD with low socio-economic background. Children in PAUD tend to have less diverse food consumption and inadequate intake of protein and important micronutrients such as iron and vitamin C. Most children consume foods that contain high sugar and high fat, but minimal intake of vegetables, fruits, and animal protein sources. In preschools with higher socio-economic backgrounds, children tend to have better access to healthy and nutritious foods, although there are still gaps in the introduction and consumption of other nutritious foods, such as calcium-rich grains and dairy products.

### **3. Role Environment Family And School in Formation of Perception**

The results of the study also showed that the role of parents and teachers is very important in shaping children's perceptions of healthy food. In both PAUDs, teachers try to teach the importance of healthy food through lesson materials and daily activities, such as introducing fruits and vegetables at meal times. However, limited information and limited time available to teachers often become obstacles for them to provide more in-depth nutrition education. Parents, especially in preschools with low socio-economic backgrounds, rely more often on fast food due to time constraints and nutritional knowledge. They also tend to provide cheaper and more easily accessible foods, although not always healthy. This shows the urgent need to increase parental knowledge and awareness about good nutrition for their children.

### **4. Analysis The Gap Nutrition Based on Status Socio- Economic**

A comparison between the two PAUDs shows that socioeconomic status strongly influences access to healthy food and understanding of nutrition. Children in PAUDs with low socioeconomic status showed poorer nutritional intake, with clear deficits in protein, vegetable and fruit consumption. They were also more likely to consume sweet and high-fat foods. In contrast, children from Preschools with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to receive a balanced, nutritious diet, although there are still gaps in their understanding of the importance of protein and grain consumption.

### **5. Implications Education Nutrition For Child Early age**

This study highlights the need for a more comprehensive and age-appropriate approach to nutrition education. Nutrition education in PAUD needs to be expanded to involve not only children, but also parents and teachers. A play-based approach and activities that involve children directly in the learning process can improve their understanding of the importance of healthy food. In addition, training for parents on how to prepare a healthy and nutritious food menu is very necessary to reduce the existing nutritional gap.

## **5 Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that children's perceptions of healthy food are still limited, with many children associating healthy food only with fruits and vegetables, but lacking an understanding of the importance of other food groups such as protein and grains. Nutritional disparities are strongly influenced by socioeconomic status, with children from low socioeconomic families tending to have poorer

nutritional intakes compared to children from high socioeconomic families. Therefore, more integrated nutrition education involving parents and teachers is essential to reduce nutritional disparities and shape eating habits. healthy in early childhood.

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