

Implementing Healthy Lifestyles Through Nutritious Eating Habits in Early Childhood: A Case Study at Mutiara Kindergarten, West Aceh

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Early childhood is a golden period that greatly determines growth and development in later life. However, parents' busy work schedules often result in suboptimal provision of nutritious food for children, who are more often given low-nutrient ready-to-eat meals. This condition has an impact on the low level of healthy lifestyle habits from an early age.

Aims: This study aims to describe the implementation of healthy lifestyles through the habit of eating nutritious food in children aged 4–5 years and to identify the obstacles encountered in its implementation at Mutiara Bangsa Kindergarten, Kaway XVI District, West Aceh Regency.

Methods: This study used a qualitative *field research* approach. Data were collected through observation, structured interviews with five parents and several teachers, and documentation. The research instruments consisted of observation sheets, child development assessment rubrics, and interview guides. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, and was tested for validity through source triangulation.

Results: The results showed that most children had begun to adopt clean and healthy habits and brought nutritious meals from home. Teachers actively guided children in group meals, limited snacks from outside, and instilled an understanding of healthy food. The main obstacles faced were parents' limited time to prepare healthy meals, children's tendency to choose food based on taste, and the influence of unhealthy snacks around the school.

Conclusion: The implementation of a healthy lifestyle through nutritious eating habits has proven to be effective in fostering healthy habits in early childhood, while also supporting children's physical and cognitive development. Continuous collaboration between teachers and parents is needed to maintain the consistency of the program, as well as the expansion of its implementation in other early childhood education institutions in an effort to shape a generation of children who are healthy, intelligent, and resilient from an early age.

Keywords: Healthy lifestyle, Nutritious food, Young children

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood refers to the age group of 0–6 years, which is a period of rapid growth and development, often referred to as the golden age of . At this stage, children are very sensitive to stimuli, so the quality of their intake will directly affect their physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and spiritual development (Akbar & Awalludin, 2020; Cuartas et al., 2023; Naimah, 2019; Uce, 2018). Adequate, balanced, and age-appropriate nutrition is therefore essential as a foundation for children to achieve optimal development and future educational success.

However, the reality shows a gap between the ideal and actual practices. Many parents, due to work demands and limited knowledge, often provide their children with practical, ready-to-eat snacks rather than nutritious home-prepared meals. Consequently, children are less accustomed to consuming vegetables, fruits, and balanced side dishes. At Mutiara Kindergarten, West Aceh, for example, some children still bring candy, wafers, or other low-nutritional snacks to school, which contradicts efforts to establish healthy lifestyle habits.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of school-based nutrition interventions. For instance, school feeding programs in various countries have been shown to improve children's dietary patterns, attendance, and academic performance. research on parental practices indicates that parents' involvement in meal preparation and modeling healthy eating behaviors significantly shape children's nutritional habits (Damanik et al., 2025; Rozi et al., 2021; Susilowati et al., 2022). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on general school-aged populations, leaving limited attention to the specific context of early childhood (ages 4–5 years) and how nutritious eating habits can serve as a vehicle for instilling broader healthy lifestyle values in preschool education.

However, to date, there have been few studies that have thoroughly examined the implementation of healthy lifestyles through the promotion of nutritious eating habits in early childhood education settings, particularly among children aged 4–5 years. Previous studies have generally focused on the introduction of healthy lifestyles in general, without specifically describing nutritious eating habits as part of children's healthy lifestyles (Angga et al., 2023; Arias Rodriguez & Sánchez Bello, 2022; Beketova et al., 2021; Nurhaliza et al., 2025) . Thus, there is a research gap to explore the effectiveness of nutritious eating habits as an effort to shape a healthy lifestyle in early childhood, as well as a novelty in early childhood education studies.

The selection of the variable of nutritious eating habits in this study was based on the fact that nutritional fulfillment is a major factor in supporting children's physical growth, brain development, and the formation of healthy living habits (Li, 2024; Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Pinto et al., 2023) . Nutritional deficiencies in early childhood can lead to decreased immunity, growth disorders, and reduced learning abilities in children (Fauziyah et al., n.d.; Nasution et al., 2024; Ramlah, 2021) . Conversely, a balanced nutritional intake has been proven to improve children's concentration, intelligence, and fitness, making it highly relevant as a research focus at the Janatul Hasanah Aceh early childhood education center.

This gap highlights the novelty of the present study, which specifically examines the implementation of nutritious eating habits as a foundation for healthy lifestyles among 4–5-year-old children in an early childhood education setting. By focusing on this age group, the study contributes to understanding how consistent nutritional practices at school can foster not only physical growth but also cognitive and behavioral development.

Therefore, this study aims to describe how healthy lifestyles are implemented through nutritious eating habits in early childhood, and to identify challenges faced during the process, with a case study at Mutiara Kindergarten, West Aceh. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical contributions to early childhood education research and practical insights for teachers and parents in fostering sustainable healthy lifestyles from an early age.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with *field research* (Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2024; McNett et al., 2022). This approach was chosen because it aims to describe phenomena in depth in a natural context. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the meaning of participants' behaviors, experiences, and views directly in the field. In this case, the research is aimed at describing the implementation of a healthy lifestyle through the habit of eating nutritious food in 4-5-year-old children systematically and accurately according to their daily context in kindergarten.

Participants

The research was conducted at Mutiara Kindergarten in the Kaway XVI district of the West Aceh regency during the first semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. The school had 52 children enrolled in three classes: Playgroup, Class A, and Class B. The focus group consisted of children aged 4–5 years old in Class A (21 students). Additionally, five parents and three classroom teachers were included as informants. They were purposely selected based on their direct involvement in implementing nutritious eating habits. Although the number of parent informants was small, the study prioritized depth over breadth, a limitation acknowledged in the discussion.

Population and the methods of sampling

The population in this study consisted of all children aged 4–5 years at Mutiara Bangsa Kindergarten along with their parents and teachers. The sampling technique used *purposive sampling*, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on the consideration that they know, understand, and are directly involved in the habit of eating nutritious food for children. Data were collected through three main techniques: observation, structured interviews, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with five parents, asking questions about their understanding of nutritious food, clean and healthy living habits, and the implementation of exercise in early childhood. Observations used a child development assessment sheet containing four indicators: (1) beginning to get used to clean and healthy living, (2) bringing healthy and nutritious food, (3) paying attention to food allergies, and (4) maintaining a safe, healthy, and nutritious diet and drinking habits. Each indicator was given a rating scale of ND, SD, SDH, and SDV (not developed, starting to develop, developing as expected, and developing very well). Data validity was strengthened through *triangulation of sources*, comparing data from observations, interviews, and documents.

Instruments

The main instrument was the researcher, who was supported by:
An observation sheet with the following indicators:

- Washing hands before eating
- Bringing healthy and nutritious food
- Paying attention to food allergies
- Maintaining safe and hygienic eating and drinking habits

The interview guide includes questions such as:

- What types of food do you usually prepare for your child to bring to school?
- What challenges do you face in preparing healthy meals every morning?

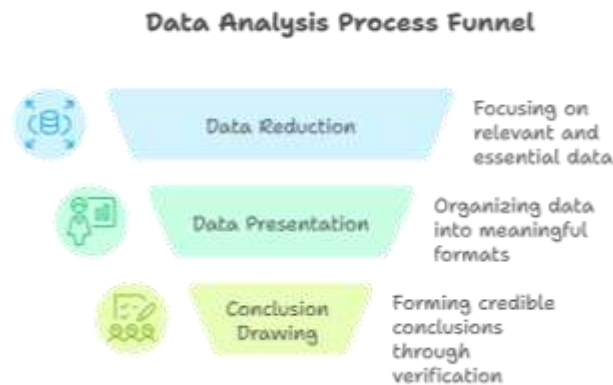
- How do teachers encourage children to choose nutritious foods during school meals?

Procedures and, if relevant, the time frame

The research was conducted at Mutiara Bangsa Kindergarten, Kaway XVI District, West Aceh Regency, on August 28, 2023. The research stages began with preparation (permitting, instrument development), data collection (observing children's behavior during group meals, interviewing parents and teachers, and documentation), followed by data processing and analysis (). The entire process was carried out in stages to ensure that the data obtained was in-depth, valid, and in line with the research objectives.

Analysis plan

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model from Miles and Huberman, as cited by Sugiyono, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification (Anisa et al., 2024; Ridder, 2014) . Data reduction is carried out to select and focus on relevant data, data presentation is carried out in the form of narratives, tables, and images to facilitate the drawing of meaning, while verification is carried out continuously throughout the research process until credible conclusions are obtained. Data validity is checked using source triangulation techniques by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1.1 Main Findings of the Study

| No. | Data Source | Focus of Findings | Findings |
|-----|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Observation of children | Clean and healthy living habits | Most children are becoming accustomed to washing their hands, brushing their teeth, and maintaining personal hygiene independently. |
| 2 | Child observation | Habit of bringing nutritious food | There are still some children who bring snacks (candy, wafers) for lunch, but most have started bringing staple foods, side dishes, vegetables, and fruit. |
| 3 | Parent interviews | Understanding of nutritious food | On average, parents understand the importance |

| | | | |
|---|--------------------|---|--|
| | | | of nutritious food (protein, vegetables, fruit), but morning rush often leads them to give their children ready-to-eat meals. |
| 4 | Teacher interviews | Implementation of the nutritious eating habit program at school | The school has been running a program of eating together, bringing healthy lunches, and limiting outside food since the 2021/2022 school year. |
| 5 | All sources | Implementation challenges | Main challenges: limited time for parents to prepare healthy meals, children preferring to choose their own food, and the influence of unhealthy snacks around the school. |

Observations of children aged 4–5 years show that most children have demonstrated clean and healthy behaviors, such as washing their hands before eating, brushing their teeth regularly, and wearing clean clothes. Children are also beginning to show independence in maintaining personal hygiene while at school. However, there are still some children who need to be reminded by teachers to practice these habits consistently, especially during communal meals.

The observation data also revealed that not all children are accustomed to bringing nutritious meals. There are still children who bring low-nutritional snacks, such as candy and wafers, due to habits formed at home. Nevertheless, the school's efforts to encourage children to bring healthy food are beginning to show positive results: more and more children are bringing meals containing rice, side dishes, vegetables, and fruit in balanced proportions in accordance with the "My Plate" concept. This indicates a gradual change in children's consumption patterns since the implementation of the nutritious eating habit program.

Interviews with five parents showed that the majority understood the importance of nutritious food to support their children's growth and intelligence. They mentioned the need for a menu that contains protein, carbohydrates, vegetables, and fruit. However, busy mornings make it difficult for some parents to prepare healthy lunches, so they often give their children ready-to-eat meals. Meanwhile, teachers stated that since the 2021/2022 school year, the school has implemented a program of eating together, bringing healthy lunches, and limiting outside food as a strategy for promoting nutritious eating habits at school.

Although the program's implementation has been quite successful, there are still several obstacles that need to be overcome. Teachers revealed that some children tend to choose food based on the taste they like, not based on its nutritional content. In addition, the influence of unhealthy snacks sold around the school is also a challenge because it attracts children to low-nutritional foods. Another obstacle is the limited time parents have to prepare healthy meals every morning, so that consistency in developing healthy eating habits has not been achieved evenly.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the habit of eating nutritious meals at school has a positive impact on the formation of healthy lifestyles in early childhood. This supports Jean Piaget's theory of early childhood development, which states that the age of 2–6 years is a *preoperational* stage that is very sensitive to sensorimotor experiences and daily habits (Nainggolan & Daeli, 2021; Pitriani et al., 2023; Whildan, 2021). When children become accustomed to seeing, tasting, and consuming healthy foods repeatedly, a new cognitive schema is formed regarding healthy foods as the primary choice. Furthermore, these results are in line with Lev Vygotsky's idea that child development is greatly influenced by social interaction and guidance from adults (*scaffolding*), in which teachers and parents at school play an important role as models of healthy eating behavior (Aydin et al., 2021; Etnawati, 2022; Kim et al., 2019). This means that implementing a nutritious eating program not only meets children's nutritional needs but also serves as a strategy for internalizing health values from an early age.

This study makes an important contribution to the development of early childhood education because it shows that the habit of eating nutritious meals can be a means of forming sustainable healthy behaviors. This contribution enriches the literature on health promotion in early childhood, which previously focused more on physical hygiene or sports activities. These findings support a holistic, integrative approach to early childhood education, as emphasized by the World Health Organization (WHO), which states that health education for children should integrate aspects of nutrition, hygiene, physical activity, and mental health in a comprehensive manner (Agiraembabazi et al., 2021; Fadlillah, 2019; Ludvigsson & Loboda, 2022). Thus, the results of this study can be used as a basis for formulating PAUD school policies to make nutritious eating part of the daily curriculum and school culture.

The study reveals a distinct challenge that was not fully captured in prior research: the influence of the local food environment around schools, where unhealthy snacks are readily available and appealing to young children. This underscores the necessity of broader community and policy interventions that go beyond parental and school-level efforts.

This research is novel in its specific focus on early childhood (ages 4–5) in Indonesia. This age group is often overlooked in nutrition and lifestyle studies, which typically emphasize older school-aged children (Aulia, 2022; Widuri et al., 2023; Wigati et al., 2022). Situating the study in a rural West Aceh kindergarten contributes to the literature by demonstrating how nutritious eating habits can be systematically fostered through collaboration between teachers and parents, even with limited resources. The study also has practical implications for developing early childhood education policies in Indonesia, particularly by integrating health promotion and nutrition education into the daily curriculum of PAUD institutions.

Thus, the findings enrich the discourse on early childhood education by demonstrating that nutritious eating habits are an educational strategy that can shape sustainable lifestyle behaviors, improve learning readiness, and support the government's broader agenda on stunting prevention and child development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of a healthy lifestyle through nutritious eating habits at Mutiara Bangsa Kindergarten in Kaway XVI District, West Aceh Regency, has been running quite well and has had a positive impact on the behavior of children aged 4–5 years. Most children showed an increase in clean living habits, awareness of maintaining personal health, and began to get used to bringing nutritious meals from home. Teachers have played an active role in guiding children through shared meals, limiting outside snacks, and instilling an understanding of healthy foods. However, there are still several obstacles, such as parents' limited time to prepare healthy lunches, children's tendency to choose foods based on taste, and the influence of unhealthy snacks around the school.

These findings reinforce Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that habituation and social interaction are key to the formation of new behaviors in early childhood. Thus, the habit of eating nutritious meals has proven to be an effective strategy for shaping healthy lifestyles in children from an early age, as long as it is done consistently, collaboratively, and sustainably between teachers and parents. The implementation of similar programs is also recommended to be adopted more widely in other early childhood education institutions as part of efforts to create a healthy, intelligent, and resilient generation from an early age.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

JH contributed to the formulation of the research idea, field data collection, and writing of the initial draft of the manuscript. RK played a role in data analysis, literature review, and preparation of the research methodology framework. LF contributed to data validation, manuscript editing, and refinement of the content and writing style of the article to its final version. All authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication.

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