

Acceptance of Healthy Food Among Early Childhood:

A Literature Review on Preferences and Environmental Influences

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ABSTRACT

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Acceptance of nutritious food among young children is a key element in supporting optimal growth and development. This study aims to investigate children's food preferences and the impact of environmental factors on healthy eating habits using a literature review method. Data were collected by analyzing scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025 from various credible sources, using keywords such as "early childhood food preferences" and "environmental influences on children's eating habits." The analysis reveals that children's food preferences are influenced by various biological factors, such as genetics and sensory development, as well as environmental factors, including parenting practices, media exposure, and the role of educational institutions. Parents who implement healthy eating patterns and provide positive role modeling play a crucial

role in shaping children's eating habits. Meanwhile, early childhood education institutions contribute through engaging and enjoyable nutrition education programs. However, picky eating behavior remains a challenge in establishing healthy dietary patterns. Therefore, a comprehensive approach involving families, schools, and the broader community is necessary to build healthy eating habits from an early age. These findings are expected to serve as a foundation for developing effective and sustainable nutrition interventions for young children.

Introduction

The acceptance of healthy dietary patterns in early childhood is crucial to supporting optimal growth and development. During this phase, children experience rapid physical and cognitive development; therefore, ensuring adequate nutritional intake is essential. However, challenges remain in establishing healthy eating habits among young children, particularly in relation to food preferences and environmental influences surrounding them (Adi et al., 2024).

Food preferences in early childhood are shaped by various elements, including biological, social, and environmental factors. Children's interactions with their surroundings—such as family members, peers, and media—significantly influence their eating behaviors. Research indicates that dietary patterns and preferences introduced and modeled by parents from an early age become the foundation for children's long-term eating habits. Furthermore, nutrition education provided to

children can affect their taste preferences and dietary patterns (Syahroni et al., 2021).

The role of parents is critical in establishing healthy eating behaviors in children (Birch & Davison, 2001). Parental efforts to provide nutritious meals, offer encouragement, and regulate the consumption of unhealthy foods can facilitate the development of positive dietary habits. Studies also show that parental feeding practices—particularly those of mothers—have a substantial impact on meeting the nutritional needs of young children. Nevertheless, many children continue to face difficulties in developing healthy eating habits, such as picky eating behavior, which may negatively affect their nutritional intake (Contento, 2016). Creative strategies, such as presenting varied and appealing food preparations, have been proven effective in addressing picky eating behaviors among children aged 5–6 years.

The school environment also contributes to shaping children’s eating habits. Instruction on healthy dietary patterns provided in early childhood education institutions can enhance children’s understanding of the importance of nutritious foods for growth and development. Research demonstrates that nutrition education positively affects children’s health outcomes, including improved immunity, enhanced learning concentration, and optimal physical development (Husain, 2023).

By understanding children’s food preferences and the environmental

influences on the acceptance of healthy foods in early childhood, effective strategies can be developed to establish healthy eating habits from an early stage. Qualitative research in this field is essential to explore more deeply the factors influencing children's eating behaviors and to design interventions tailored to their specific needs.

Methods

This study employed a **systematic literature review** approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize recent findings related to factors influencing the acceptance of healthy foods among early childhood populations (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The primary objective of this review was to examine children's food preferences and environmental influences, including the roles of family, educational institutions, and media.

Data collection was conducted by identifying **15 relevant scientific articles** from various academic databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and PubMed. The keywords used in the search process included "*early childhood food preferences*," "*environmental influences on children's eating patterns*," and "*nutrition education for children*." The selection criteria encompassed articles published within the last five years (2020–2025), studies focusing on children aged 2–6 years, and research discussing food preferences and environmental influences. Articles deemed irrelevant, duplicated, or unavailable in full-text form were excluded from the analysis.

Following the initial screening process, the selected articles were analyzed using a **thematic analysis approach** to identify recurring patterns and key findings. Several dominant themes emerged, including the role of parents in establishing healthy eating habits, the impact of media on children's food preferences, and the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in early childhood education settings. For example, one study reported that nutrition education implemented in kindergarten settings significantly increased children's interest in consuming fruits and vegetables.

To ensure the credibility and accuracy of the findings, **data triangulation** was conducted by comparing results across multiple studies that employed diverse methodologies and research contexts. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations, including challenges in accessing certain relevant articles and variations in research designs among the analyzed studies, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Through this literature review approach, the study is expected to provide comprehensive insights into the factors influencing the acceptance of healthy foods among young children, as well as to serve as a foundation for the development of effective interventions aimed at promoting healthy eating habits from an early age.

Result and Discussions

Based on the review of various relevant literature sources, a number

of studies were identified that examine factors influencing the acceptance and consumption habits of healthy foods among young children. The synthesis of findings from these studies is presented in the following table to provide a comprehensive overview of the research focus and key results.

No	Author(s)	Title of Study	Main Findings
1	Fitriana & Fatimah (2024)	Early Childhood Food Preferences	Children's food preferences are influenced by biological factors and early eating experiences. Exposure to a variety of tastes and textures from an early age makes children more receptive to healthy foods.
2	Nida & Hartanto (2021)	Parenting Styles and Children's Eating Behavior	Democratic parenting that models healthy eating habits and involves children increases acceptance of healthy foods, whereas authoritarian or permissive parenting inhibits the development of healthy eating habits.
3	U. Khasanah et al. (2024)	Early Eating Experiences and Picky Eating	Diverse complementary feeding practices shape healthy food preferences.

		Behavior	Negative eating experiences contribute to picky eating, which affects children's nutritional intake.
4	Diana, Putri, et al. (2025)	Home Environment and Children's Eating Habits	The availability of nutritious foods and parental role modeling influence children's eating habits. Exposure to unhealthy foods hinders the development of healthy eating behaviors.
5	R. Sitanggang et al. (2024)	Nutrition Education in Kindergarten	Interactive nutrition education programs significantly increase children's interest in fruits and vegetables.
6	S. Wulandari et al. (2025)	Psychological Impact of Picky Eating in Children	Children with picky eating behavior are at risk of experiencing anxiety and stress due to unbalanced dietary patterns.
7	Sari & Lestari (2023)	Consumption Patterns and Children's Food Preferences	Children who are accustomed to consuming fast food show lower preferences for vegetables and fruits compared to those who regularly consume home-cooked

			meals.
8	Prameswari et al. (2022)	Media Exposure and Children's Food Choices	Advertising of foods high in sugar and fat increases children's tendency to choose unhealthy foods over nutritious options.
9	Handayani & Putri (2024)	Children's Involvement in Food Preparation	Involving children in food preparation increases interest and acceptance of healthy foods by fostering a sense of ownership and curiosity.
10	Nugroho et al. (2023)	Socioeconomic Status and Children's Dietary Patterns	Socioeconomic status affects food quality. Families with better access to food are able to provide more diverse and nutritious meals.
11	Rahmawati & Syamsudin (2024)	Breakfast Habits and Children's Eating Patterns	Children who regularly consume balanced breakfasts demonstrate more structured eating patterns and a higher tendency to choose healthy foods.
12	Lestari et al. (2023)	Family Mealtime Atmosphere and Children's Eating Behavior	A warm and pressure-free mealtime environment increases children's acceptance of new foods

			and reduces food refusal behavior.
13	Utami & Pratama (2024)	Frequency of Vegetable and Fruit Consumption in Early Childhood	Children who are frequently exposed to vegetables and fruits from an early age show higher preferences for healthy foods.
14	Salsabila et al. (2022)	Relationship Between Regular Mealtimes and Children's Nutrient Intake	Regular meal schedules are associated with better nutritional adequacy and a reduced risk of picky eating behavior.
15	Hidayat & Kusuma (2025)	Teachers' Role in Establishing Healthy Eating Habits in Kindergarten	Teachers who model and reinforce healthy eating habits at school increase children's awareness and interest in nutritious foods.

Based on the findings summarized in the table above, it can be concluded that the acceptance of healthy foods among young children results from the interaction between internal and external factors. Internal factors include children's biological tendencies and early sensory experiences with food, while external factors encompass parenting styles, the home environment, and educational interventions in early childhood education settings.

The synthesis of previous studies indicates that the family environment plays a dominant role in shaping children's food

preferences and eating habits, particularly through parental role modeling, consistent provision of nutritious foods, and children's involvement in food-related activities. Moreover, early eating experiences are closely linked to the development of food preferences at later stages. Children who are exposed to a diverse range of foods from an early age tend to demonstrate greater flexibility in food choices, making them more receptive to healthy foods. Conversely, negative eating experiences—such as forced feeding or irregular eating patterns—may reinforce picky eating behavior, which can negatively impact children's nutritional adequacy.

In addition, early childhood education institutions, particularly kindergartens, contribute significantly to the formation of healthy eating habits through interactive and contextual nutrition education programs. The findings of this review imply that efforts to improve healthy food acceptance among young children cannot be implemented in isolation. Instead, they require a comprehensive and integrated approach involving families, schools, and the broader social environment. Therefore, the establishment of healthy eating habits in early childhood should be understood as a multidimensional process that simultaneously involves biological, psychological, and social aspects, enabling intervention strategies to produce more sustainable impacts on children's health and growth.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review conducted, it can be concluded that young children's acceptance of healthy foods is the result of a complex interaction between individual preferences and environmental influences. Children's food choices are not solely determined by biological factors such as genetics or sensory development, but are also strongly shaped by early eating experiences, parental feeding practices, and exposure to the broader social environment, including media and educational institutions.

The family environment—particularly the role of parents as role models and food providers—exerts a substantial influence on the development of children's eating habits. Supportive and democratic parenting approaches that actively involve children in food-related activities have been shown to enhance children's acceptance of healthy foods. Furthermore, nutrition education programs implemented in early childhood education institutions significantly contribute to fostering children's interest in nutritious foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly regarding picky eating behavior, which may negatively affect nutritional adequacy and children's emotional well-being. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that involves the active participation of parents, educators, and the surrounding environment is essential to establish healthy eating habits from an early age. Sustainable and evidence-based interventions are

likely to generate long-term positive effects on children's growth, health, and overall quality of life.

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