

# PARENTS' AND PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' INSIGHTS ON BALANCED NUTRITIOUS DIET FOR CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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**Abstract.** School is an excellent setting to promote healthy eating behaviors for school-aged children. Parental eating habits and feeding techniques also could impact children's eating habits and food choices. Designing sustainable strategies and approaches to encourage healthier eating among children requires understanding their perspectives on a balanced nutrition diet. This study aimed to uncover insightful perspectives that will contribute to developing effective methods and interventions for promoting a balanced nutritious diet among school-aged children. This study was qualitative research with an exploratory case study approach. The informants in this study were 4 parents and 3 primary school teachers from SDIT Khoirru Ummah Malang, Indonesia. The method used to collect data was focus group discussion (FGD) employing the FGD guideline. Information was obtained in Indonesian, recorded, verbatim transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Parents and teachers already tried to promote a balanced diet based on their understanding. Both parents and teachers agreed that they play an equally significant role in providing children with adequate nutrition instruction. They should encourage healthy eating for their children by setting an excellent example because children are good imitators. They understand the value of giving children a healthy, balanced diet. The study also showed the need for engaging children's learning materials to convey diet and health concepts. Parents and teachers understand the value of nutrition education and the necessity for specialized knowledge about a balanced diet. Eating patterns are formed from childhood, so they need a solid educational foundation from their parents, teachers, peers, and engaging learning media.

**Keywords:** school-aged children, balanced nutritious diet, role of parent and teacher

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## INTRODUCTION

Malnutrition, referring to a deficit, excess consumption, or imbalanced nutritional intake, has been a concern in Indonesia in recent years. The prevalence of stunting among children under five in 2022 was 21.6% which decreased from 24.4% the previous year (Ministry of Health Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Despite this, the percentage remains very high, given that the desired stunting prevalence in Indonesia by 2024 is 14% and WHO threshold for developing countries are 20% (Indonesian Government, 2021; de Onis *et al*, 2019). Furthermore, the problem of wasting and being underweight has worsened since 2021. Meanwhile, the prevalence of overweight under two years decreased become 3.5% (Ministry of Health the Republic of Indonesia, 2022).

The balanced nutritious diet pillar emphasizes four principles: consuming various foods, living a healthy lifestyle, doing physical activity, and checking weight regularly to maintain a healthy weight. Implementing a balanced nutritious diet may contribute to alleviating malnutrition problems. A balanced nutritious diet helps maintain general health, strengthens the immune system, provides energy, and lowers the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease later in life (Childs *et al*, 2019; Soo, 2018). A review study concluded that compared to students who don't eat a balanced diet, those who

score better on examinations exhibit better behavior and are more likely to attend class and complete their given work more fully (Prangthip *et al*, 2019). However, a study found that children between the ages of five and fifteen were not consuming enough to meet their recommended dietary requirements. In addition, because of the demands of modern life, many parents find it difficult to instill proper eating habits in their children (Haines *et al*, 2019).

Parents and teachers agree that school is an excellent setting to promote healthy eating behaviors for school-aged children (Aydin *et al*, 2021). The school setting offers a healthy environment for children. Schools create a social environment in which children can learn and interact with one another. Through nutrition interventions in schools, it is possible to build a culture and healthy norms related to nutrition, which can positively influence children's eating behavior. Therefore, the school setting is crucial when developing strategies to address all forms of malnutrition in children (WHO, 2021). Furthermore, parents and primary school teachers are critical as nurturers and educators in developing children's food habits and overall well-being (Aydin *et al*, 2021; Haines *et al*, 2019).

According to a study, parental eating habits and feeding techniques significantly impact children's eating habits and food choices (Scaglioni *et al*, 2018). It is believed that educating children about which meals are 'good' and 'bad' for their health may help them make better dietary decisions. However, based on a cognitive eating approach, such strategies have little effect on children's willingness to consume nutritious foods (Marty *et al*, 2018).

Designing sustainable strategies and approaches to encourage healthier eating among children requires understanding their perspectives on a balanced nutrition diet (Prangthip *et al*, 2019). The

purpose of this study was to uncover insightful perspectives that will contribute to enabling the development of effective methods and interventions for promoting a balanced nutritious diet among school-aged children.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study design

This study was qualitative research with an exploratory case study approach. The research was conducted at SDIT Khoirru Ummah Malang. Data collection was carried out in June 2023.

### Participants and recruitment

The participants involved in this study were 4 parents and 3 school teachers at SDIT Khoirru Ummah Malang. The researchers justified the number of participants based on the saturation data collection, ie additional data did not draw any new arising themes. This was in accordance with Ochieng *et al* (2018) who suggested a range of 3-21 with a median of 10 participants and Adler *et al* (2019) who, from their literature review, a focus group discussion comprised 6-8 participants with a maximum of 10. Participants were selected by purposive sampling. The participants received the information sheet and gave consent to participate in the study. They also allowed the interviews being recorded on audio.

### Data collection

The focus group discussion (FGD) process lasted 60 minutes. This

study used one FGD guideline for both teachers and parents to acquire extensive and in-depth information to ensure expected findings and that all questions were answered. The FGD between teachers and parents was carried out simultaneously. The technical stages of data collecting begin with determining a study topic, examining the literature, defining sub-categories, and developing instruments.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken to understand parents' and teachers' insights on the balanced nutritious diet for children. Before the FGD process began, participants were informed of the research's purpose and that all ideas offered during the discussion were valuable. The discussion was recorded using a tape recorder and notes. Participants were asked about a balanced nutritious diet, such as the message of balanced nutrition, the application of children's diets, and optimizing balanced nutrition education. The confidentiality of all data was ensured, as was the anonymity of all participants throughout the study procedure. Table 1 shows the focus group questions developed in this study.

## **Data analysis**

Information was obtained in Indonesian, recorded, verbatim transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Firstly, the transcriptions of the interviews were manually coded. Secondly, the first author looked for topics, which included arranging diverse codes into suitable themes. The themes were defined and labeled in the third phase about the study's objectives and the features of the information gathered by each topic. Codes or labels describe research results in narratives and compare them with theories or other research results according to the research theme. The final stage was to create the analysis report, which gave a cohesive and logical description of

Table 1  
Focus group questions

Theme	Questions
Conceptualization of balanced nutritious diet	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you know about 'Balanced Nutrition'?</li> <li>2. Have you ever heard of the term 'Balanced Nutrition Messages'?</li> <li>3. What is your perspective on balanced nutrition for children?</li> <li>4. What is your opinion on 'diverse food'?</li> </ol>
Application of children's diet	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does your child consume diverse foods daily, including staple foods, dishes, vegetables, and fruits? If you still need to, please mention the types of food that your child often consumes.</li> <li>2. Is your child accustomed to eating breakfast in the morning?</li> <li>3. What challenges do you encounter regarding your child's eating habits?</li> <li>4. What are your expectations for your child's eating patterns or habits with the principles of balanced nutrition?</li> <li>5. What efforts do you make to establish a habit of balanced nutrition for your child?</li> </ol>
Optimizing balanced nutrition education for children	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In your opinion, is education related to nutrition important for children?</li> <li>2. Are there any activities in the school that support the improvement of nutrition knowledge and skills for students?</li> <li>3. Do you think that nutrition education is important from an early age?</li> <li>4. What kind of learning media is needed to convey nutrition messages to children?</li> </ol>

the data captured by collecting fully developed themes. All authors reviewed the final codes, which included the themes and it is reported in the results section below.

### **Ethical consideration**

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Politeknik Kesehatan Kemenkes Malang (Research Ethics Number: 695/VII/KEPK POLKESMA/2023).

## **RESULTS**

Parents ( $n=4$ ) and teachers ( $n=3$ ) discussed the balanced nutritious diet for children. Three primary themes include (i) conceptualization of a balanced nutritious diet, (ii) application of children's diet, and (iii) optimizing balanced nutrition education for children. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of focus group discussion participants.

### **Conceptualization of balanced nutrition**

Participants defined balanced nutrition as food consumed by the body's requirements. The concept of balanced nutrition according to the participants' view of the Indonesian version of MyPlate guide (USDA, 2011) is described below:

*"As far as I know, balanced nutrition differs from when we were young. In my era, 'four were healthy, five were perfect'. Well, now it's not like that, right? Now there is 'MyPlate' which is one-third vegetables, one-third of side dishes, and one-third of rice." Mother 1, 39 years old*

Table 1  
Demographic characteristics of focus group discussion participants

Demographic characteristic	Parents <i>n</i> = 4	Teacher <i>n</i> = 3
Gender		
Male	0	0
Female	4	3
Education		
Doctoral/Master degree	0	0
Bachelor	3	3
Senior High School	1	0
Junior High School	0	0
Age (years), mean $\pm$ SD	28.25 $\pm$ 3.304	28.67 $\pm$ 6.027
Number of children		
$\leq 2$	2	1
$> 2$	2	2

SD: standard deviation

*"We have vegetables, side dishes, carbohydrates, and protein in one meal. The amounts depend on the needs. The important thing is that the food has carbohydrates and protein."* Mother 2, 42 years old

Balanced nutrition is not only interpreted in terms of the type of food served and the amount needed by the body but also means "balanced" when the food consumed has a good impact on health.

*"Balanced nutrition can affect or facilitate the work of organs. The organs in the body are all important, and they need nutritious food. So, a balanced diet is a food that can facilitate the work of the organs."*  
Female Teacher 1, 37 years old



## Application of children's diet

Based on the findings of the interviews, parents and teachers tried to promote a balanced diet based on their understanding. However, practicing balanced nutrition is complex, and the mother encountered internal and external obstacles. Parents emphasized that children have their eating preferences and tend to eat only the foods they like.

*"My son doesn't like vegetables, especially green vegetables."* Mother 2, 42 years old

*"Today's children find it challenging to try new foods. They only want to eat food that they know and like. So, yes, they only want their comfort food."* Mother 3, 36 years old

Children need reasons and explanations why they should eat a balanced nutritious diet. They asked critically when their parents asked them to eat vegetables, but their mother didn't.

*"My child is wondering why I have to eat this (vegetable) but me, as a mother, does not."* Mother 1, 39 years old

*"When the child asks why healthy food is important, I, as a parent, explain that the brain capacity of adults has decreased, in contrast to young children. Children's brains are still developing, so they need healthy food."* Mother 2, 42 years old

The mother provides the food the child asks for rather than not eating anything. Another challenge faced is external factors from the environment, such as media and parental influence. One participant said other caregivers, such as grandmothers, also affected children's eating consumption.

*"Like it or not, you have to eat what is provided. But in the end, if the child still doesn't want to eat, we provide the requested food rather than the child not eating at all."* Mother 4, 40 years old

*"I live with my parents. I have prepared vegetables for the child. But she didn't want to eat, then she ran to her grandmother saying 'Grandma, I want to eat instant noodles' and her grandmother must have made it right away. Sometimes my child only eats rice and 'masako' (seasonings). Use the 'secret seasoning'."* Mother 3, 36 years old

The teachers, conversely, believed that a child's eating habits are impacted by their parent's eating habits and peers.

*"Some students in my class are used to not having breakfast because it is a habit from their families and parents at home."* Female Teacher 1, 37 years old

Parents and teachers agreed that they have a role in explaining balanced nutrition to children. Parents highlight the importance of being grateful for what they have. Even if they dislike specific foods, children should not criticize the food.

*"I tell my children about scavengers around the house. Look, kid, earlier you didn't want to eat vegetables. A scavenger was having difficulty finding food; it's not certain that he can eat vegetables. So, I teach my children to be grateful for the food we have."* Mother 1, 39 years old

*"We discussed with students what kind of food they usually eat. Further, we discuss whether the food they usually eat is healthy. I tell the students, what we eat, with Allah's permission, will affect our daily life and the future."* Female Teacher 2, 42 years old

Parents recognized the importance of understanding nutrition, especially their function and influence on the body. They acknowledged that their child occasionally seeks additional information on this matter.

*"If they (children) ask why we have to eat vegetables. Parents must also have a 'stock of knowledge' about vegetables. So, we, as parents, can give answers. For example, a child has difficulty defecating, so parents can explain that because you don't have enough vegetables."*  
Mother 2, 42 years old

*"We need to explain the impact of not eating healthy. Usually, I say why do you have to eat vegetables. Look at a friend his age who doesn't eat vegetables and gets sick. So how is he? How tall is he? Those who don't like vegetables, those who don't like chicken, those who only eat crackers, what's the condition? Children will see real examples."* Mother 1, 39 years old

## **Optimizing Balanced Nutrition Education for Children**

Based on the interview findings, the final theme we compiled was efforts to optimize balanced nutrition education for children.

*"At school, we have a lesson that discusses healthy and nutritious food. Apart from that, we also hold training on serving healthy food for children."* Female Teacher 2, 42 years old

*"For example, the parents of the students agreed on what lunch to bring to school today. Whether the menu is from catering or cooking yourself, the children may be stimulated to eat healthy food with friends."* Female Teacher 1, 37 years old

*"The problem of nutrition is important from the start. Not only elementary school children, but Kindergarten children also have to be given knowledge about nutrition because younger children find it easier to grasp new knowledge."* Mother 2, 42 years old

The teacher underlined that children were good imitators. They believed parents should encourage healthy eating for their children by setting a good example. Peers are also good role models for adopting a good diet.

*"It's easier for children to imitate. Is it imitating parents or imitating their peers. That's more effective than just being "told" what to eat."* Female Teacher 1, 37 years old.

*"I occasionally come across a kid who notices his classmate carrying a veggie lunch to school; then he requested his friend's meal of veggies."* Female Teacher 2, 42 years old

The parents thought of the necessity for engaging in nutrition education materials or media. It is believed that creative and interactive media could be helpful for children to develop more interest in a subject, which will improve their knowledge.

*"Nowadays, kids like reading comics more. For them to catch a message, I think it can be done through comics. They read two pages and are sleepy if it's just a book. In contrast to comics, the pictures have a story; maybe the message will be captured more quickly."* Mother 2, 42 years old

*"The learning model uses motion graphics, you know. That's what the kids like too."* Mother 1, 39 years old.

## DISCUSSION

This study identified that the participants perceived a balanced diet as consuming diverse foods based on needs, which will influence organ function and health in the future. Parents believed a balanced and nutritious diet was a crucial concern that should be given to children at a young age. However, parents encountered challenges when implementing their understanding of balanced nutrition into reality by providing children with a balanced diet. Parents acknowledged that their child had a fussy palate. They admitted that the children tended to eat just what they enjoyed and had their preferences. This shows that nutrition education is also needed for grandparents to consistently encourage and support the eating habits of their grandchildren so that there is an agreement on the application of good eating patterns between parents and grandparents. A study showed that the most important factors influencing a child's eating behavior and food preferences are their parents' eating patterns and feeding practices (Burnett *et al*, 2023; Kim *et al*, 2019; Scaglioni *et al*, 2018). Another systematic research review confirmed that parental beliefs, emotions, and awareness should be targeted alongside parent-feeding practices because they affect childhood picky eating behaviors (Wolstenholme *et al*, 2020).

In addition to internal factors, external factors, such as the presence of other caregivers such as grandparents, are challenges. This study found that parents were worried about the permissiveness of grandparents toward their grandchildren, and this finding is consistent with other studies (Rogers *et al*, 2019; Kim *et al*, 2019). This shows that nutrition education is also needed for grandparents to consistently encourage and support the eating habits of their grandchildren so that there is an agreement on the application of good eating patterns between

parents and grandparents (Kim *et al*, 2019). Barriers to eating children are indeed common. However, these barriers can still be overcome. Positive parenting, eating together, a healthy home food environment, and the pleasure of eating healthful foods are aspects of promoting a balanced diet in children (Haines *et al*, 2019).

This study found that parents and teachers agreed that nutrition education for children is critical. Nutrition education programs could positively affect schoolchildren's knowledge and attitudes and may be essential for developing and improving nutrition status (Antwi *et al*, 2020; Cheng *et al*, 2020). However, other studies have found that nutrition education does not change students' consumption behavior. This suggests that changing behavior or eating habits in elementary school students is a complex process and may require more than just classroom lessons (Serebrennikov *et al*, 2020).

Participants in this study agreed that parents are role models for introducing healthy foods. Several previous studies support these results. One of the first and most basic environments for shaping children's eating behavior is the parenting environment (Haines *et al*, 2019). Another study concluded that parents' food preferences influence their children's eating habits (Kim *et al*, 2019). However, other studies also state that teachers can act as effective role models in student meal choices (Metos *et al*, 2019; Acharya and Acharya, 2020). A study's findings implied that children's knowledge and eating habits may be significantly influenced by skilled teachers instructing nutrition education in primary schools (Cotton *et al*, 2020). Parents respected teachers' roles in nutrition education because they felt their children paid more attention to teachers than to them.

Furthermore, this study also found that parents and teachers felt

their child's schoolmates also influenced how their child chose food. Other studies corroborate that positive peer pressure can influence healthy eating habits (Aydin *et al*, 2022; Ragelienė and Grønhø, 2020). Social relationship factors can explain the influence of peers on children's eating behavior. Social factors also explain why some children are more easily influenced by their peers than others. The influencing factors are attachment to peers and belonging to peer groups (Ragelienė and Grønhø, 2020).

This study found that the primary concern of balanced nutrition diet education is to empower children with the information and abilities they need to make educated choices about their food. This involves being aware of appreciating the advantages of eating a balanced diet. Increasing children's food knowledge and preferences requires a positive environment to develop healthy eating behaviors. Research in Sri Lanka proves that intervening in children's education with parents or caregivers can positively increase children's dietary diversity (Sirasa *et al*, 2021). Another qualitative study in Australia showed that nutrition education can improve children's health by broadening their understanding of a nutritious diet and making better food choices (Aydin *et al*, 2022).

Research showed that teachers hope nutrition education is not just a burden on teachers and schools. Parents must be involved in children's nutrition education (de Vlieger *et al*, 2019). This study found that the parents considered the need to consume media or resources for nutrition instruction. Engaging children in creative and interactive media can help them become more interested in a subject, increasing their understanding. To promote healthy eating habits in children, there is a need for comprehensive behavior modification techniques that include supporting food skills like menu planning, food buying, and cooking. These strategies should also be used in conjunction with nutrition

education programs. With the help of family/parents, teachers, and peers, these interventions should start with young children to enhance the eating environment and bring about long-lasting change (Thakur and Mathur, 2021).

This study has several limitations. First, we interviewed parents and teachers together at the same time. This could lead to limited information obtained from both parents and teachers. Second, despite reaching data saturation, the small sample size restricted a new and deeply detailed understanding of the examined phenomena. Another limitation of the study is that we did not know whether the participants were single parents, whether they had multiple adults, or whether the family lived with grandparents.

In conclusion, there was an agreement between parents and teachers that they have an equally important role in delivering balanced nutrition education to children. They recognize the importance of a balanced nutritious diet for children. Furthermore, the study revealed the need for exciting learning media for children as a medium for nutrition and health messages.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge and thank Universitas Negeri Malang, which has funded this study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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