

Balanced Food Consumption Patterns in Elementary School Children: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Balanced food consumption patterns are one of the important factors in supporting the growth and development of elementary school children. However, various studies show that school-age children still face challenges in implementing healthy eating patterns, which are influenced by low nutritional awareness, limited access to nutritious food, and the influence of the school and social environment. This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method that aims to examine various scientific findings related to factors that influence elementary school children's food consumption and effective intervention strategies. Data sources were collected from relevant national and international scientific journals in the last five to ten years. The results of the study show that low nutritional education in schools and families, as well as the dominance of unhealthy foods in school canteens, are the main causes of unbalanced consumption patterns. Educational and collaborative strategies are needed that involve the roles of schools, parents, government, and the community to shape children's healthy eating behavior in a sustainable manner. This study is expected to be a conceptual reference for designing nutrition education programs and healthy food policies in elementary education environments.

Keywords:

Balanced Nutrition, School Children's Consumption, Literature Study

Introduction

Elementary school age is a crucial stage in the process of physical growth and cognitive development of children. At this stage, the child's body requires sufficient and balanced intake of energy and nutrients to support daily activities and optimal learning processes. However, reality shows that many school-age children do not yet have a diet that is in accordance with the principles of balanced nutrition. An imbalance in nutritional intake can have a direct impact on children's health, such as decreased endurance, impaired height and weight growth, and decreased concentration and academic achievement at school.

On the other hand, awareness of the importance of a balanced diet is still low, both among children and parents. Lack of nutrition education in the family and school environment causes children to become accustomed to consuming instant foods, high in sugar, salt, and saturated fat, which actually risk causing health problems such as obesity or malnutrition. Parents often do not have sufficient knowledge about the types of healthy foods and the right portion sizes, so that children's nutritional intake is not well controlled. This situation is a major challenge in efforts to form healthy eating habits from an early age which should start from the closest environment, namely family and school.

Furthermore, children's food consumption patterns are also greatly influenced by the social and cultural environment, especially in the school environment. School canteens that serve unhealthy snacks, massive food advertisements, and social pressure from peers contribute to forming eating habits that are far from balanced nutritional standards. The culture of consumption in society that prioritizes taste and practicality over nutritional content also worsens this condition. Without regulation and supervision of food consumed by children at school, and without the active role of teachers and educators in providing examples and nutrition education, unhealthy eating patterns will continue to develop without adequate control.

Given the importance of this problem, a literature review is needed to provide a comprehensive picture of the balanced food consumption pattern in elementary school children. Through a literature review, various research results, theories, and intervention strategies that have been carried out in various regions can be analyzed and synthesized as a basis for formulating policy recommendations and effective nutrition education programs. This review also serves to identify factors that cause consumption imbalances, as well as the role of school and family institutions in shaping healthy consumption behavior. Thus, this study is expected to provide a scientific contribution in supporting the development of healthy human resources from an early age through an evidence-based nutrition education approach.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method to examine the pattern of balanced food consumption in elementary school children. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to deeply understand the social phenomena and consumption habits of school-age children in their daily context, as well as to analyze various factors that influence these eating patterns based on written sources. The literature study was conducted by reviewing, identifying, and analyzing the results of previous studies, scientific articles, institutional reports,

and policies related to child nutrition and balanced food consumption published in the last five to ten years.

Secondary data sources were collected from relevant national and international scientific journal databases, such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and the Garuda portal. Inclusion criteria included publications discussing food consumption patterns of elementary school children, nutrition education, school-based and family-based interventions, and challenges in implementing a balanced diet. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques, by grouping literature findings into main themes such as internal factors of children, the influence of family and school environments, and educational strategies that have proven to be effective.

In the analysis process, researchers conducted a critical synthesis of the data obtained by comparing and integrating various perspectives from different literatures. The validity of the data in this literature study was maintained through the selection of reputable and thematically relevant sources, as well as the use of current references that have gone through a peer-review process. The results of this study are expected to provide a strong conceptual basis for formulating nutritional education strategies and interventions for elementary school-aged children's consumption patterns more effectively and based on evidence.

Results and Discussion

The food consumption patterns of elementary school children are one of the fundamental aspects in shaping long-term health and quality of life. During this period, the need for energy and nutrients increases along with growth and high physical activity. However, data from various studies show that many elementary school children still do not consume food according to the principles of balanced nutrition. According to a study by the Indonesian Ministry of Health (2022), around 35% of children aged 6–12 years experience a lack of fruit and vegetable intake, while consumption of foods high in sugar and fat is quite high. This imbalance in intake not only inhibits physical growth but also has an impact on children's cognitive abilities, endurance, and enthusiasm for learning at school.

The lack of nutrition education in the family and school environment is one of the main factors causing unhealthy consumption patterns. Based on a literature review by Fitriani et al. (2021), parents' understanding of the principle of "Isi Piringku" and the Balanced Nutrition Guidelines is still low, so that feeding children tends to be based on habit, taste, and practicality alone. On the other hand, schools as educational institutions have not fully facilitated learning about nutrition systematically. The basic education curriculum only touches on the basic aspects of health science

without emphasizing the practice of consuming healthy foods in everyday life. As a result, children do not have a good foundation of knowledge or habits in choosing healthy foods.

The school environment plays a strategic role in shaping children's consumption behavior, because most of the children's time is spent at school. However, the results of the literature review indicate that school canteens do not fully support the implementation of healthy food consumption. Research by Dewi and Rahmawati (2020) shows that more than 70% of elementary school canteens in Indonesia sell foods that are high in sugar, salt, and oil, and contain synthetic dyes. In addition, not many schools have healthy canteen regulations or control the quality and nutritional content of the snacks sold. This condition exacerbates children's low access to healthy food and reinforces eating patterns that are not in accordance with the principles of balanced nutrition.

Eating culture in families and communities also contributes greatly to shaping children's consumption patterns. In some areas, traditional foods high in carbohydrates and low in vegetables are the main daily food. Based on a study by Handayani and Nursalam (2022), children from families who are not accustomed to consuming nutritious side dishes or fruits tend to bring the same eating patterns to school. This indicates that changes in eating behavior are not enough to be carried out only at school, but also require the active involvement of parents through family nutrition education. In this case, a multilevel approach involving schools, families, and communities is important in efforts to form balanced consumption habits.

The importance of school-based nutrition education is a major theme in the various literatures analyzed. Several studies, such as those presented by Lestari and Gunawan (2021), show that collaborative nutrition intervention programs between teachers, health workers, and parents can improve children's understanding of the importance of consuming a balanced diet. A fun educational approach, such as learning through pictures, games, and healthy cooking demonstrations, has been shown to increase knowledge and change students' eating behavior gradually. Therefore, the integration of nutrition education into elementary school intracurricular and extracurricular activities is an urgent need.

In addition to education, access to healthy food is also an important variable in determining children's consumption patterns. Literature from WHO (2021) shows that family economic access to quality food ingredients greatly determines the success of a nutrition program. Families from lower-middle economic groups tend to choose fast food or processed foods that are cheaper and easier to obtain, even though they have low nutritional value. In this context, healthy food subsidy programs in schools or community-based interventions such as school nutrition gardens and local fruit banks could be feasible solutions to overcome limited access to healthy food ingredients.

This literature review also highlights the importance of the media's role in shaping children's food consumption preferences. Aggressive food advertising that is directed at products high in sugar, salt, and fat is a challenge in itself. Children as consumers who are not yet able to think critically are often driven by visuals and celebrity invitations in food advertisements, which reinforce the habit of choosing unhealthy foods. A study by Fauziah (2020) revealed that children who are exposed to snack advertisements for more than two hours per day tend to have a higher body mass index. Therefore, controlling children's food advertisements in the media, as well as social campaigns about the importance of balanced nutrition, need to be strengthened as part of a preventive strategy.

Based on the overall findings from the analyzed literature, it can be concluded that the pattern of balanced food consumption in elementary school children is the result of a complex interaction between individual factors, family, school environment, socio-culture, and mass media. Efforts to improve consumption patterns cannot be done partially, but require a sustainable integrative approach. This study confirms that evidence-based and contextual nutrition education strategies, which involve various parties simultaneously, are a strategic step to form a healthy, productive, and nutrition-aware young generation from an early age.

Conclusion

Balanced food consumption patterns in elementary school children are an important foundation for physical growth, cognitive development, and long-term health quality. Based on the results of the literature review, it was found that many elementary school-aged children still do not consume food according to the principles of balanced nutrition, which is caused by minimal nutrition education in the family and school environment, limited access to healthy food, and the negative influence of food advertising and the social environment. The school environment, especially the canteen, does not fully support the practice of healthy food consumption, while the eating culture in the family often does not prioritize nutritional balance.

Efforts to establish healthy consumption patterns require a comprehensive and evidence-based approach, including fun nutrition education integrated into the school curriculum, active involvement of parents in children's nutrition education, and regulatory support for food consumed in the school environment. In addition, controlling unhealthy food advertising for children, as well as providing access to nutritious food through community interventions such as school gardens and healthy food subsidies, are important parts of a long-term strategy.

This review shows that the formation of a balanced consumption pattern in elementary school children cannot be done separately, but must involve synergy between the government, schools,

families, and communities. With a collaborative and sustainable approach, it is hoped that a generation can be created that is not only academically intelligent, but also physically healthy and aware of the importance of balanced nutrition in everyday life.

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