

## Food Pedagogy and Parenting Programs In Improving Food Literacy of Early Childhood: A Systematic Literature Review

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### Article info

### Abstract

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*The increasing exposure of children to ultra-processed foods highlights the importance of developing food literacy from early childhood. This study aims to identify food pedagogy strategies applied in early childhood education, examine parenting-based nutrition programs influencing children's food literacy, evaluate their effectiveness based on Scopus-indexed empirical studies, and identify research gaps in integrated school-family intervention models. This research employed a Systematic Literature Review guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. Literature searches were conducted in Scopus and Web of Science for articles published between 2014 and 2025. After screening and eligibility assessment, twelve empirical studies were included in the analysis. The findings indicate that experiential food pedagogy approaches such as cooking activities, gardening, and project-based learning effectively enhance children's food knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward healthy eating. Parenting-based nutrition programs also contribute significantly to improving children's dietary behaviors through parental modeling and family engagement. However, most interventions are implemented separately within school or family contexts, indicating the need for integrated school-family intervention models to strengthen sustainable food literacy development in early childhood.*

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education, Food Literacy, Food Pedagogy, Parenting Programs

### Abstrak

Meningkatnya paparan anak terhadap makanan ultra-proses menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan literasi pangan sejak usia dini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi strategi food pedagogy pada pendidikan anak usia dini, mengkaji program nutrisi berbasis parenting, mengevaluasi efektivitasnya berdasarkan studi empiris terindeks Scopus, serta mengidentifikasi kesenjangan penelitian terkait model intervensi terintegrasi sekolah-keluarga. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode Systematic Literature Review dengan panduan PRISMA 2020. Pencarian literatur dilakukan pada database Scopus dan Web of Science untuk artikel yang dipublikasikan pada tahun 2014–2025. Setelah proses seleksi, dua belas artikel empiris dianalisis dalam penelitian ini. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan food pedagogy berbasis pengalaman seperti kegiatan memasak, berkebun, dan pembelajaran berbasis proyek efektif meningkatkan pengetahuan, keterampilan, serta sikap anak terhadap makanan sehat. Program nutrisi berbasis parenting juga berkontribusi dalam meningkatkan perilaku makan anak melalui keteladanan orang tua dan keterlibatan keluarga. Namun, sebagian besar intervensi masih dilaksanakan secara terpisah antara sekolah dan keluarga, sehingga diperlukan model intervensi terintegrasi untuk mendukung pengembangan literasi pangan anak secara berkelanjutan.

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**Kata kunci:** Literasi Pangan, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Food Pedagogy, Program Parenting

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## INTRODUCTION

Global food systems have undergone rapid transformation over the last decade, characterized by increased availability of ultra-processed foods, digital marketing exposure, and declining home cooking practices. These structural shifts have significantly influenced children's dietary patterns worldwide (Monteiro et al., 2019; Boyland et al., 2022). Ultra-processed food consumption is strongly associated with childhood obesity, metabolic risk, and long-term health complications (Elizabeth et al., 2020). Preschool-aged children are particularly vulnerable because they lack cognitive maturity to critically interpret persuasive food marketing messages (WHO, 2023). Therefore, early preventive education strategies are urgently needed.

Early childhood (ages 4–5) represents a sensitive developmental window in which food preferences, taste acceptance, and eating habits are established (Nicklaus, 2017; Ventura & Worobey, 2013). Longitudinal evidence suggests that early dietary exposure predicts adolescent and adult eating patterns (Russell et al., 2023). During this phase, repeated exposure, sensory exploration, and social modeling shape children's acceptance of vegetables and healthy food options (Nekitsing et al., 2018). Consequently, food-related educational interventions implemented at this stage may generate sustained behavioral effects.

The concept of food literacy has emerged as a comprehensive framework to address food-related competencies. Vidgen and Gallegos (2014) conceptualized food literacy as a multidimensional construct involving functional, interactive, and critical domains. Contemporary scholarship expands this framework to include ecological awareness, food systems understanding, and sustainability literacy (Truman et al., 2022). In early childhood contexts, food literacy encompasses the ability to recognize healthy foods, demonstrate basic food-related skills, and express positive attitudes toward nutritious eating.

School-based food education has increasingly shifted from traditional nutrition instruction toward experiential food pedagogy. Food pedagogy integrates cooking activities, gardening, sensory play, and reflective discussion to facilitate meaningful engagement (Flowers & Swan, 2016; Sumner, 2016). Experiential approaches grounded in constructivist learning theory demonstrate stronger behavioral outcomes compared to didactic nutrition lessons (Thomas & Irwin, 2022; Slater et al., 2023). These interventions promote both functional and interactive food literacy competencies among young learners.

However, educational settings alone may not sustain behavioral change. The family food environment remains a dominant predictor of children's dietary intake (Birch & Davison, 2001; Scaglioni et al., 2018). Responsive feeding practices, parental modeling, and structured meal routines significantly influence children's food preferences and self-regulation abilities (Vaughn et al., 2016). Parenting programs that

strengthen parental nutrition literacy and self-efficacy have shown measurable improvements in children's dietary quality (Contento, 2016; Slater et al., 2023).

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a compelling framework for understanding food literacy development as a product of microsystem interactions between school and family. Evidence suggests that interventions spanning both environments yield more consistent dietary improvements than single-context programs (Oostindjer et al., 2020). Nevertheless, empirical studies integrating food pedagogy and structured parenting programs within one cohesive model remain limited.

Furthermore, research in early childhood contexts particularly in developing or agrarian regions remains underrepresented in high-impact literature. Most studies focus on primary school populations or short-term interventions without longitudinal evaluation (Truman et al., 2022). There is also limited application of mixed-method systematic reviews synthesizing process and outcome data.

Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to (1) identify food pedagogy strategies applied in early childhood settings, (2) examine parenting-based nutrition programs that influence children's food literacy, (3) evaluate their effectiveness based on Scopus-indexed Q1–Q3 empirical studies, and (4) identify research gaps for integrated school–family intervention models.

## **METHODS**

### **Design**

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA guideline was selected to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor in identifying, screening, and synthesizing empirical evidence related to food pedagogy and parenting programs in early childhood contexts. The review aimed to systematically identify high-quality empirical studies indexed in Scopus and categorized within Quartile 1 to Quartile 3 journals.

### **Research Questions**

This systematic review was conducted to answer three research questions. First, what food pedagogy strategies have been implemented in early childhood settings to enhance food literacy? Second, what is the effectiveness of parenting-based nutrition programs in improving children's food literacy? Third, to what extent have integrated school–family intervention models been developed and evaluated in empirical studies?

### **Data Sources and Search Strategy**

Literature searches were conducted in two major international databases, namely Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected due to their comprehensive indexing of high-impact peer-reviewed journals and their relevance to education, health sciences, and interdisciplinary research.

The search was conducted using Boolean operators to ensure precision and comprehensiveness. The search string applied was: ("food literacy" OR "food education" OR "food pedagogy") AND ("early childhood" OR preschool) AND ("parenting program" OR "family intervention"). Searches were limited to articles published between 2014 and 2025 to ensure that findings reflect contemporary developments in food literacy and early childhood education research. Only English-language publications were included to maintain consistency in analysis.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) empirical research articles; (2) published between 2014 and 2025; (3) indexed in Scopus within Quartile 1, Quartile 2, or Quartile 3 journals; (4) focused on participants aged 0–8 years; and (5) examined food literacy, food pedagogy, parenting programs, or integrated interventions in early childhood contexts.

Studies were excluded if they were review articles, conference papers, book chapters, editorials, or commentaries. Articles focusing exclusively on adolescents or adult populations were also excluded. Additionally, studies that discussed obesity prevention without addressing food literacy dimensions were removed during the eligibility screening stage.

### **Data Extraction**

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a standardized extraction template. The extracted information included author(s), publication year, journal name, Scopus quartile classification, research design, sample characteristics, intervention type, outcome measures, and key findings. This process ensured consistency and minimized bias in recording relevant study characteristics.

### **Data Synthesis**

The selected studies were synthesized narratively. Findings were organized according to the three research questions. The synthesis emphasized patterns of intervention strategies, effectiveness outcomes, and implementation challenges. Rather than conducting a meta-analysis, this review adopted a qualitative synthesis approach due to heterogeneity in study designs, intervention types, and measurement instruments across the included articles.

### **Quality Assessment**

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed by ensuring that all selected articles were published in Scopus-indexed Q1–Q3 journals. Additional evaluation considered research design clarity, sample adequacy, intervention description, and outcome measurement validity. This step was undertaken to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the review findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

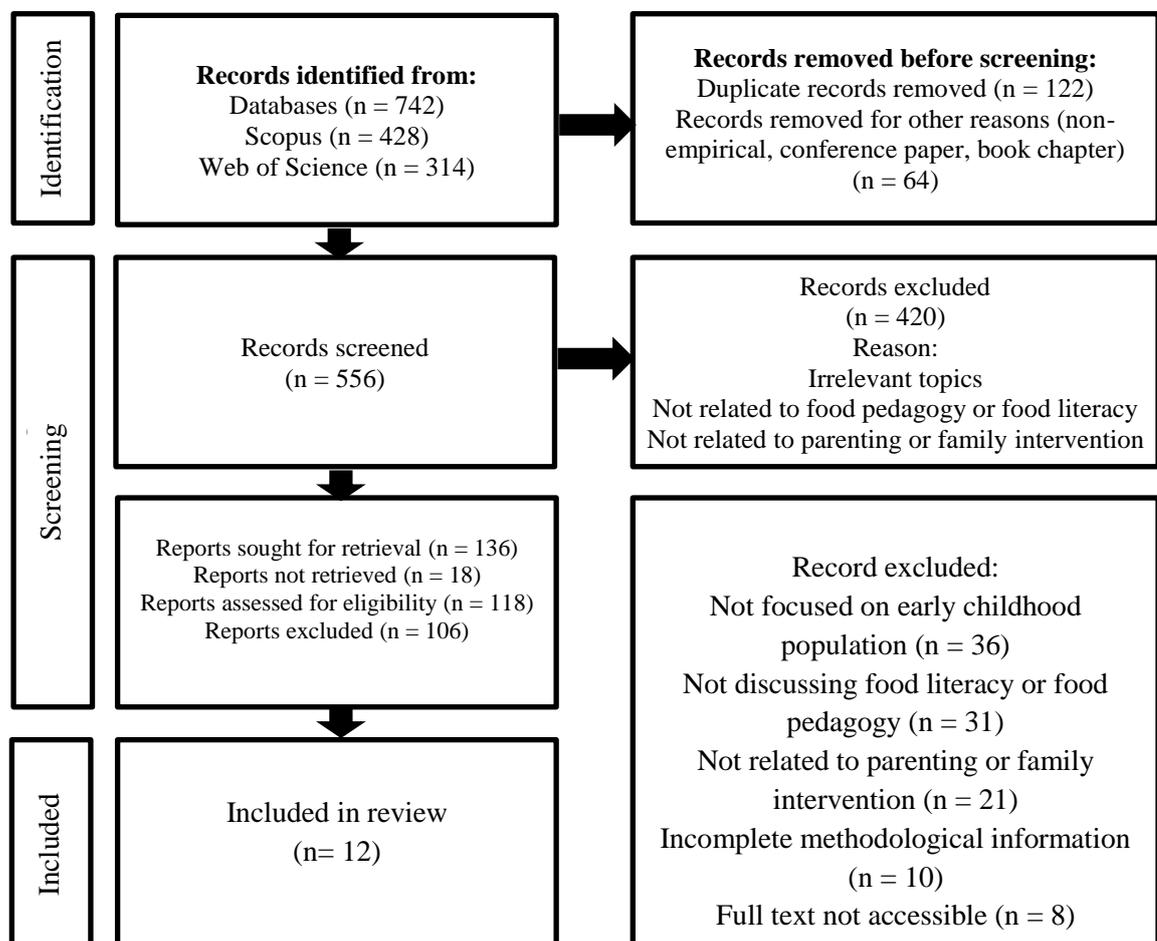
### Results

#### Systematic Article Selection Process

The article search and selection process in this study was conducted systematically following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol (Haddaway et al., 2022). The identification stage yielded 742 articles obtained from several academic databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and Google Scholar.

At the initial screening stage, 186 articles were removed, consisting of 122 duplicate articles and 64 non-empirical publications, leaving 556 articles for title and abstract screening. After this stage, 420 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the research focus, particularly studies that did not address food pedagogy, food literacy, or parenting-based interventions in early childhood.

A total of 136 articles were subsequently assessed through full-text screening. During this stage, 124 articles were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, such as not focusing on early childhood populations, not addressing food literacy or nutrition education, or lacking clear empirical findings. Ultimately, 12 articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected for detailed analysis in this systematic review. These articles represent diverse approaches to food pedagogy and parenting-based interventions implemented in various educational and sociocultural contexts.



### Results of Data Analysis and Synthesis

Based on the literature review conducted on studies published between 2014–2024, a total of 12 articles met the inclusion criteria and directly addressed the research questions. Most of these studies focused on children aged 0–8 years, emphasizing experiential learning, food literacy programs, and parental involvement in shaping healthy eating habits. Details of the selected articles are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Synthesis of Main Findings

<b>Name/Year</b>	<b>Research Title</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Thomas & Irwin (2011)	Cooking with Kids: A Systematic Review of the Effects of Cooking Interventions on Children's Food Preferences	Cooking activities improve children's willingness to try healthy foods and increase food knowledge.
Gibbs et al. (2013)	Expanding Children's Food Experiences: The Impact of a School-Based Food Program	School-based food programs increase children's food literacy and encourage healthier eating choices.
Slater et al. (2018)	Food Literacy Programs for Children and Families: A Systematic Review	Food literacy programs positively influence knowledge, cooking skills, and dietary behaviors.
Vidgen & Gallegos (2014)	Defining Food Literacy and Its Components	Food literacy is a multidimensional construct including knowledge, skills, and critical awareness related to food systems.
Ronto et al. (2016)	The Development of a Food Literacy Tool for Adolescents	Food literacy includes planning, managing, selecting, preparing, and eating food in ways that promote health.
Cullen et al. (2015)	Influence of Family Environment on Children's Eating Behavior	Parental involvement significantly influences children's dietary habits and food preferences.
Varman et al. (2021)	Experiential Learning Interventions and Healthy Eating Outcomes in Children	Experiential learning improves children's understanding of nutrition and encourages healthy food choices.
Tartaglia et al. (2024)	Food Literacy and Positive Feeding Practices Program for Parents	Parenting programs improve children's eating behaviors through positive feeding strategies.
Rusdin et al. (2023)	Educating Early Childhood about Healthy and Unhealthy Foods	Early nutrition education helps children recognize healthy and unhealthy foods.
Hsin (2023)	Implementing Project-Based Learning for Scientific Practices	Project-based learning improves children's engagement and scientific understanding.
Ferrero (2021)	Effectiveness of Project-Based Learning among Young Learners	PjBL increases motivation and learning outcomes in early childhood education.
Kelly & Nash	Food Literacy Interventions in	Educational programs focusing on

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(2021)	Elementary Schools	food literacy increase children's knowledge and improve eating behaviors.
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## **Discussion**

### **Food Pedagogy Strategies Applied in Early Childhood Education**

The findings of this systematic literature review reveal that various food pedagogy strategies have been implemented in early childhood education to enhance children's understanding of food, nutrition, and healthy eating practices. Food pedagogy emphasizes experiential and contextual learning approaches that allow children to actively engage with food through exploration, observation, and hands-on activities.

Several studies highlight the effectiveness of experiential learning activities, such as cooking, gardening, and food preparation, in developing children's food knowledge and awareness of healthy eating habits (Thomas & Irwin, 2011; Varman et al., 2021). These activities enable children to interact directly with food ingredients, observe food preparation processes, and understand the relationship between nutrition and health outcomes.

Furthermore, food pedagogy often integrates multidisciplinary learning approaches that combine science, mathematics, and social learning within food-related activities. For instance, children may learn mathematical concepts through measuring ingredients or develop scientific thinking by observing physical changes during cooking processes (Hersch et al., 2014). Such approaches not only improve food literacy but also support broader cognitive development among young learners.

Another important aspect of food pedagogy involves introducing children to food systems and sustainability concepts. Through contextual learning activities, children can develop an early understanding of where food comes from, how it is produced, and why healthy food choices are important for both personal health and environmental sustainability (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014).

### **Parenting-Based Nutrition Programs Influencing Food Literacy**

The results of this review also demonstrate that parenting-based nutrition programs play a significant role in shaping children's food literacy and eating behaviors. Parents act as primary agents in children's food environments, influencing food preferences, dietary patterns, and eating habits from an early age.

Several empirical studies show that parental involvement in nutrition education programs significantly improves children's understanding of healthy food choices and increases the likelihood of consuming nutritious foods (Cullen et al., 2015; Tartaglia et al., 2024). Parenting programs typically include educational workshops, practical cooking sessions, and guidance on positive feeding practices.

In addition, family-based interventions encourage parents to adopt responsive feeding practices, which emphasize supporting children's autonomy in food selection while providing appropriate guidance. Such approaches have been shown to reduce

unhealthy eating behaviors and improve children's acceptance of fruits and vegetables (Scaglioni et al., 2018).

These findings suggest that the effectiveness of food literacy programs for early childhood is strongly influenced by the consistency between educational practices at school and food environments at home. When parents actively participate in nutrition education initiatives, the knowledge and behaviors introduced in educational settings are more likely to be reinforced in daily family routines.

### **Effectiveness of Food Pedagogy and Parenting Programs**

Based on the analysis of Scopus-indexed empirical studies (Q1–Q3) included in this review, both food pedagogy and parenting-based interventions demonstrate positive impacts on children's food literacy and healthy eating behaviors.

Food pedagogy approaches that involve experiential learning activities have been shown to improve children's knowledge of food groups, nutritional value, and food preparation skills (Slater et al., 2018). These programs also contribute to increasing children's willingness to try new foods and adopt healthier dietary habits.

Similarly, parenting-based nutrition interventions have demonstrated measurable improvements in children's eating behaviors, particularly in increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and reducing the intake of unhealthy foods (Birch & Ventura, 2009). Programs that combine school-based learning with family engagement tend to produce stronger and more sustainable outcomes compared to interventions implemented only within educational institutions.

The reviewed studies also highlight that interactive and participatory learning methods are more effective than traditional nutrition education approaches. When children actively participate in food-related activities, they develop a deeper understanding of nutrition concepts and are more motivated to apply this knowledge in their daily lives.

### **Research Gaps and Future Directions for School–Family Integration**

Despite the growing body of research on food pedagogy and parenting-based nutrition programs, several important research gaps remain. First, many existing studies focus on school-based interventions without sufficiently integrating family participation. As a result, the continuity between educational environments and home environments is often limited. Second, relatively few studies have examined integrated school–family intervention models that simultaneously involve teachers, parents, and communities in promoting food literacy among young children. Such integrated models are essential for creating consistent food environments that support healthy eating behaviors. Third, there is still limited research exploring long-term impacts of food literacy interventions in early childhood, particularly regarding how early nutrition education influences dietary behaviors later in life.

Future research should therefore prioritize the development and evaluation of holistic intervention models that integrate food pedagogy in schools with parenting-

based nutrition education at home. Collaborative programs involving teachers, parents, and community stakeholders may provide more sustainable approaches for improving children's food literacy and promoting lifelong healthy eating habits.

## **CONCLUSION**

This systematic literature review shows that food pedagogy strategies in early childhood education predominantly employ experiential and participatory approaches such as cooking activities, gardening, sensory exploration, and project-based learning to enhance children's food literacy and encourage positive attitudes toward healthy eating. The findings also indicate that parenting-based nutrition programs play a crucial role in shaping children's dietary behaviors through parental modeling, responsive feeding practices, and family-based learning activities that reinforce school-based education. Empirical evidence from Scopus-indexed studies demonstrates that both school-based food pedagogy and family-oriented interventions can improve children's food knowledge, willingness to try nutritious foods, and overall dietary quality. However, most interventions are still implemented separately within school or family contexts, highlighting a significant research gap in the development of integrated school–family intervention models that collaboratively involve educators, parents, and communities to strengthen sustainable food literacy development in early childhood.

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