

Parental Strategies For Overcoming Picky Eating Habits In Children Aged 2-3 Years

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Abstract

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Picky eating habits in children aged 2-3 years often pose a challenge for parents. Children who exhibit selective eating behaviour tend to reject certain types of food, which can affect their nutritional adequacy and development. This study focuses on exploring the strategies used by parents in dealing with selective eating behaviour in young children. A qualitative approach with in-depth interviews was used as a research method to obtain more in-depth data from a number of parents who have children aged 2-3 years with selective eating habits. The results of the study show that parents apply various strategies, such as persuasive approaches, setting positive examples, varying food presentation, and consistency in applying eating rules. These strategies have been proven to help children become more open to trying different types of food. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide insights for parents and educators to support the positive development of children's eating patterns.

Keywords: Picky eater, 2–3-year-old child, Parental strategies

Abstrak

Kebiasaan picky eater pada anak usia 2-3 tahun seringkali menjadi tantangan bagi orang tua. Anak yang menunjukkan perilaku memilih makanan cenderung menolak berbagai jenis makanan tertentu, sehingga dapat memengaruhi kecukupan gizi dan perkembangan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali strategi yang diterapkan orang tua dalam mengatasi perilaku picky eater pada anak usia dini. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik wawancara mendalam kepada sejumlah orang tua yang memiliki anak berusia 2-3 tahun dengan kebiasaan picky eater. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa orang tua menerapkan berbagai strategi, seperti pendekatan persuasif, pemberian contoh makan yang positif, variasi penyajian makanan, serta konsistensi dalam penerapan aturan makan. Strategi ini terbukti membantu anak menjadi lebih terbuka dalam mencoba berbagai jenis makanan. Diharapkan hasil penelitian ini dapat memberikan wawasan bagi orang tua dan pendidik untuk mendukung perkembangan pola makan anak secara positif.

Kata Kunci: Picky Eater, Anak usia 2–3 tahun, Strategi Orang Tua

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a developmental intervention aimed at children from birth to six years of age, providing educational stimulation that encourages physical and mental growth and development in order to prepare children for further education. Early childhood education is expected to provide preparation and readiness for further education (Hasnawati, 2022).

Early childhood refers to children aged 0-6 years, also known as the Golden Age. During the Golden Age, children experience significant growth and development in terms of their cognitive, physical, social and emotional aspects. One factor that influences this process is a balanced and healthy diet, but not all children have a good diet; some children may have a healthy diet. Some children find it difficult to accept new foods and only want to eat foods they are familiar with, making them reluctant to try new flavours (Sakinah et al., 2025).

Human resources in the future depend on the quality of Indonesian children. Children are the pillars of the nation's future prosperity. One of the factors that determine the quality of human resources is growth and development in early childhood. Quality human resources are healthy, intelligent, and productive human resources, which are determined by several factors, one of which is the fulfilment of nutritious food needs and the achievement of optimal nutritional status. Parents play a crucial role in fulfilling their children's nutritional needs (Rahmawati et al., 2020)

For young children to grow up healthy, intelligent, and active, it is very important for them to have a balanced nutritional intake. It is very important to be an active parent in the family. Providing and meeting children's nutritional needs at all times is the duty of parents to help their growth. Families influence children's behaviour, including nutritional behaviour. Families help improve health through the introduction of healthy foods and health practices, as well as setting an example for other family members (Munawaroh et al., 2022)

The role of parents is very important for children's health. Healthy children are those who grow and develop normally. The role of parents in relation to child growth includes early breastfeeding, providing sufficient breast milk, and interacting with children through smiles, hugs, praise, play, and singing together. A child's growth and development is not always smooth and easy; there are several obstacles (Adhani, 2019). Children who experience prolonged eating difficulties will suffer negative effects, such as malnutrition. Malnutrition can lead to reduced biological development, suboptimal growth and intelligence, and a weakened immune system, leaving them vulnerable to illness and death (Anantha et al., 2024)

The problem that occurs in children is that they become selective eaters, or commonly referred to as picky eaters. Picky eating behaviour is when children refuse to eat or have difficulty eating because they are too selective about the types of food they like or only eat certain foods. This behaviour is a form of children's eating patterns and can indicate their nutritional status (Heryanto et al., 2023). A picky eater is someone who is selective about food, does not want to try new foods or new flavours, avoids

certain types of food, and chooses specific foods. Children show that they have preferred and disliked foods. Food refusal depends on the child's personality. Parents often mistakenly give their children certain foods, causing children to be labelled as picky eaters (Putri & Muniroh, 2019).

Choosing food or picky eating in children can be a problem related to the child's nutritional status. This certainly affects the growth and development of children during the following period. One way to overcome this is by fulfilling good nutritional needs. Preschools sometimes have children who have difficulty eating, or even children who excessively like certain foods. In cases of underweight, micronutrient deficiencies, or inadequate weight gain, the effects of selective eating are linked to nutritional issues. Picky eaters dislike a variety of foods, eating habits, and food displacement caused by children (Suryani et al., 2022). Efforts to overcome eating difficulties can be done through pharmacological or non-pharmacological means. Pharmacological efforts include administering multivitamins, appetite stimulants, supplements, milk and other micronutrients. Non-pharmacological efforts can be done through herbal drinks or traditional medicine, massage, acupressure and acupuncture (Sani et al., 2023).

Parents must play an important role in preventing children from experiencing difficulties when eating. For example, they must ensure that children eat appealing foods so that they do not get bored with the food provided, limit the consumption of snacks and treats that will make children full before main meal times, and provide children with nutrient-rich foods that meet their nutritional needs. Eating difficulties in children can lead to delayed puberty, slow growth, short stature, osteopenia and osteoporosis, as well as psychological disorders (anxiety and depression) (Atika, 2023). The importance of parenting styles in helping the development of children who are picky eaters cannot be ignored. Parenting styles encompass the interaction between parents and children, where parents play an important role in educating, guiding, and disciplining children, as well as protecting them so that they grow up in accordance with social norms (Fitriani et al., 2024).

Various risk factors associated with picky eaters include emotional factors, organic or physical conditions, physiological elements, health problems, nutritional considerations, the effects of medication, and environmental impacts. The role of parents in educating picky eaters is very important because parenting involves a dynamic relationship between parents and children. Parents have an important role in educating, guiding, and disciplining their children while ensuring that they develop according to their age. This study aims to provide parents, especially mothers, with strategies for dealing with picky eaters and effective ways to handle early childhood eating problems. To improve children's nutritional quality and reduce the negative effects of unhealthy eating patterns, it is hoped that a successful solution will be found using an approach based on an understanding of picky eaters

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive method. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena related to children's eating behavior and parental roles in addressing picky eating habits. The descriptive method was used to describe the actual conditions found in the field based on the experiences and perspectives of the research participants. The main sources of data in this research consisted of the words and actions of individuals observed or interviewed, which served as primary information for understanding the situation under study. This research can also be categorized as field research because the data were obtained directly from the research setting through interactions with the participants.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Semerap Village, West Danau Kerinci Subdistrict, Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province. This location was selected intentionally because preliminary observations indicated that many children aged 2–3 years in the area tend to exhibit picky eating behavior. Such conditions make it important to explore more deeply the role of parents in overcoming the limited variety of foods consumed by their children. By focusing on this location, the research aimed to capture contextual factors that influence children's eating patterns and parental strategies in managing these behaviors.

Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of five children aged between two and three years old who showed indications of picky eating behavior. These children and their parents became the primary sources of information for the research. The selection of participants was based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly regarding children who experience difficulties in accepting a variety of foods.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through observation and interviews. Observation was conducted to directly examine children's eating behaviors and parental interactions during mealtime. Meanwhile, interviews were carried out with parents to obtain detailed information regarding their experiences, strategies, and challenges in managing their children's eating habits. These two techniques were used to obtain comprehensive and contextual data related to the research focus.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed several stages, including data recording, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. First, all data obtained from observations and interviews were recorded systematically. Next, the data were reduced

by selecting and focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. After that, the data were organized and presented in a structured manner to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and findings that emerged from the analyzed data.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity of the data, the researchers conducted verification by comparing the findings obtained during the research process with the actual conditions in the field. This step aimed to ensure that there were no discrepancies between the researchers' interpretations and the real situations experienced by the participants. Through this validation process, the credibility and reliability of the research findings could be maintained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observations and interviews conducted with parents in Semerap Village revealed that children aged 2–3 years tend to display selective eating behaviour or picky eating. The five children involved in this study showed limited food preferences and tended to reject certain types of food based on taste, texture, aroma, or appearance. Most children preferred foods with sweet or savoury flavours and tended to avoid vegetables or foods with unfamiliar textures.

Food Refusal Based on Taste and Aroma

One of the participants, the mother of a two-year-old child (Informant P1), explained that her child tends to reject foods with certain textures and aromas.

“Ibu P said, ‘Children tend to be curious about everything, such as what fruits taste like and what vegetables taste like, so that their curiosity is satisfied.’” (P1)

When asked whether she had introduced new foods to her child, she responded:

“It depends on whether they like it or not. If they like it, they will eat it; if they don't like it, they will throw it away.” (P1)

According to Informant P1, the child's picky eating behaviour began around the age of 10 months. Initially the child only rejected certain foods, but gradually the food choices became more limited. To deal with this condition, the mother usually prepares foods that the child prefers and provides snacks, fruits, and vegetables that the child is willing to eat.

Food Refusal Based on Texture Preferences

Another participant (Informant P2), the mother of a two-year-old child, described a different pattern of picky eating behaviour. Her child prefers crunchy foods with savoury flavours and refuses vegetables.

When asked about foods that are frequently rejected, she explained:

“The foods that are often refused are vegetables.” (P2)

When refusing food, the child typically covers their mouth, shakes their head, and says “No, no.” If the mother insists, the child cries and refuses to eat altogether. Informant P2 stated that this behaviour began when the child was about 15 months old. Initially the child did not show signs of picky eating, but as the child grew older the selective eating behaviour became more evident. The child prefers foods such as biscuits, rice with fish, tempeh, tofu, and fried eggs, while avoiding green vegetables. To address this issue, the mother tries to introduce vegetables gradually by presenting them in more appealing and playful ways.

Food Refusal Related to Health Conditions

Different findings were observed in the case of Informant P3, the mother of a three-year-old child who cannot consume nuts due to a congenital medical condition.

When asked about foods rejected by the child, she explained:

“Aya's appetite is below average. She refused everything her sister gave her, but there were times when she would eat anything as long as it was served with sambal. The point is, her appetite is poor.” (P3)

When the child refuses food, the child closes their mouth or spits the food out and cries. The mother tries several strategies to encourage eating, including playing with the child during meals, interacting with peers, and using cooking games on a mobile phone.

According to Informant P3, the child has shown picky eating behaviour since the introduction of complementary foods at six months of age. The child prefers dry and crunchy foods such as biscuits and often refuses foods with soft textures such as porridge or rice. To overcome this issue, the mother sometimes replaces rice with alternative carbohydrate sources such as potatoes and presents foods in attractive shapes to stimulate the child's interest.

Selective Eating of Specific Food Groups

Another participant, Informant P4, reported that her three-year-old child refuses vegetables and fish.

When asked about the child's food preferences, she explained:

“He likes sambal with eggs, but he dislikes sambal with vegetables and fish.” (P4)

When forced to eat vegetables or fish, the child cries and becomes angry. To ensure adequate nutrition, the mother attempts to modify food preparation methods. For example, vegetables are chopped finely and mixed into eggs, while fish is processed into fish nuggets to reduce the fishy smell. Although the child still tends to refuse these foods, the mother reported gradual improvement as the child slowly becomes more willing to try them.

Selective Eating Based on Fruit Texture and Appearance

Selective eating behaviour was also observed in fruit consumption. Informant P5, the mother of a three-year-old child, explained that her child refuses certain fruits due to their texture and appearance.

She stated:

“I tried giving her grapes and apples, and she reacted happily, but when I gave her avocados and papayas, her reaction changed drastically. She wanted to spit out the fruit in her mouth and said it tasted strange.” (P5)

The child also noticed differences in colour and appearance, describing avocados and papayas as having “strange colours” compared to apples and grapes. To maintain adequate fruit intake, the mother provides fruits that the child prefers, such as bananas, oranges, apples, and grapes.

“I don't force him to eat, instead I give him bananas, oranges, apples and grapes, which he really likes, as long as the nutrients from the fruit are still there.” (P5)

She also attempts to present disliked fruits in creative ways, such as mixing avocado with chocolate or combining papaya with other fruits. Overall, the findings indicate that picky eating behaviour among children aged 2–3 years in Semerap Village is influenced by several factors, including food texture, taste, aroma, visual appearance, and individual health conditions. Parents generally avoid forcing children to eat and instead attempt to introduce new foods gradually through various strategies.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that picky eating behaviour among children aged 2–3 years is characterised by selective food preferences and rejection of certain foods based on taste, texture, smell, or visual appearance. This behaviour was consistently observed among all five participants, although the specific patterns varied between children. These findings align with previous studies stating that picky eating is a common behavioural phenomenon in early childhood when children begin to develop food preferences and autonomy in eating behaviour (Adhani, 2019). The results also show that children often prefer foods with sweet or savoury flavours and crunchy textures, while vegetables and foods with unfamiliar textures are frequently rejected. Similar findings were reported by Afriyani Rahmawati et al. (2020), who explained that children's food consumption patterns are strongly influenced by sensory characteristics such as taste, texture, and appearance. When children perceive food as unfamiliar or unpleasant, they tend to refuse it even before tasting it.

Another important finding is that picky eating behaviour often begins during the transition to complementary feeding. Several parents reported that their children started showing selective eating habits between six months and fifteen months of age. This finding is consistent with research by Putri and Muniroh (2019), which found that picky eating behaviour often emerges during the early stages of complementary feeding when children are introduced to a wider variety of foods.

Parental strategies play a significant role in managing picky eating behaviour. In this study, most parents avoided forcing children to eat foods they disliked. Instead, they used alternative approaches such as modifying food presentation, mixing vegetables into preferred foods, or introducing new foods gradually. These strategies reflect responsive feeding practices that aim to encourage children's willingness to try new foods without creating negative eating experiences. Previous studies have also emphasized that parental feeding strategies strongly influence children's eating habits and nutritional intake (Munawaroh et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2022). The findings also highlight the importance of parental knowledge regarding nutrition and child feeding practices. Some parents demonstrated creative strategies in introducing healthy foods, while others expressed uncertainty about how to ensure balanced nutrition for their children. According to Putri et al. (2024), mothers' knowledge about nutrition and feeding practices plays a crucial role in preventing feeding problems such as picky eating.

Furthermore, picky eating behaviour can potentially affect children's nutritional status if it persists over time. Limited dietary variety may reduce the intake of essential nutrients required for optimal growth and development. Previous studies have shown that children with persistent picky eating behaviour are at risk of inadequate macro-nutrient intake and may experience nutritional imbalances (Anantha et al., 2024; Heryanto et al., 2023). Therefore, early intervention is necessary to address picky eating behaviour in young children. Parents need to adopt supportive feeding practices, introduce food variety gradually, and maintain a positive eating environment. Educational support for parents regarding child nutrition and feeding strategies may also help reduce the prevalence of picky eating behaviour and ensure adequate nutritional intake for children (Sakinah et al., 2025; Atika, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study found that children aged 2–3 years in Semerap Village tend to exhibit selective eating behaviour or picky eating, which is influenced by several factors such as food texture, taste, aroma, and appearance. Some children tend to reject foods with soft textures, while others avoid vegetables or foods with strong or unfamiliar smells. These preferences generally begin to develop in early childhood and become more noticeable as children grow older and start to express stronger food preferences. The findings also indicate that parents play an important role in managing picky eating behaviour. Various strategies are used by parents to encourage children to eat, including presenting food in a more attractive way, mixing less preferred ingredients into foods that children like, and gradually introducing new types of food. These approaches are intended to reduce children's resistance to food while maintaining a positive eating environment. Therefore, patience, creativity, and parental awareness are essential in helping children develop healthier eating habits. Through consistent efforts and supportive feeding practices, children can gradually become more open to trying

different types of food, which in turn helps ensure that their nutritional needs are adequately fulfilled for optimal growth and development.

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