



EARLY CHILDHOOD FOOD LITERACY IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Food literacy is the comprehensive and in depth ability of individuals that encompasses knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding nutrition, culture, information, and food systems, as well as their impact on health, the environment, and the economy. This is manifested in conscious, logical, responsible, and confident behavior in selecting, managing, preparing, and consuming nutritious food in a healthy, safe, and sustainable manner. Food literacy is a basic competency that needs to be instilled from an early age to form healthy and nutritious eating habits and responsible consumption behaviors for the optimal growth and development of children and a bright future for the nation. The family is the first environment that plays a strategic role in shaping food literacy in early childhood. This study aims to examine the importance of food literacy in early childhood and the role of families in shaping food literacy in early childhood. The method used is a literature review of books, guidelines, reports and articles in research journals relevant to the research objectives within the last 10 years. The results of the study indicate that early food literacy is important for establishing healthy eating patterns, with families playing a key role in instilling values, understanding, and daily eating habits. These findings recommend strengthening the role of families in food education and intervention programs to support the creation of a golden generation and a high-quality future for the nation.

Keywords: food literacy, early childhood, family role, nutrition education, feeding practices and eating habits.

INTRODUCTION

In welcoming *Indonesia Emas 2045*, it is essential to have high-quality human resources who are competitive on the global stage. Efforts to improve the quality of human resources and shape an excellent generation must begin from an early age. Early childhood serves as the main foundation for human resource development, as this is the period when physical, cognitive, language, character, and personality development occurs optimally, determining a person's quality of life and becoming the key to future success.

Improving the quality of early childhood is a highly valuable investment for Indonesia's future, because in the next 10 to 20 years, these children will enter their productive age, becoming the main driving force of national development and the key players in achieving the vision of *Indonesia Emas 2045*.

The population of early childhood children in Indonesia is quite large. Referring to the *Situation of Children in Indonesia Report* by UNICEF in 2020, it is stated that one-third of Indonesia's population consists of children under five years old. The total number of children in Indonesia is approximately 80 million, making it the fourth-largest child population in the world. (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2020).

Furthermore, according to the results of the *March 2024 National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas)*, as cited in the *2024 Early Childhood Profile Book* published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), around 10.82 percent of Indonesia's population falls within the age range of 0–6 years. This data indicates that 1 in every 10 Indonesians is a child aged 0–6 years or within the early childhood stage (Ummah, 2019). Both data from UNICEF and BPS show that the number of young children in Indonesia remains significantly high. Unfortunately, the quality of early childhood development in Indonesia still faces challenges, especially concerning the issue of malnutrition experienced by young children across the country.

Indonesia continues to face four major nutritional challenges affecting early childhood, namely stunting, underweight, wasting (severely thin children), and anemia (UNICEF, 2020). These nutritional problems must be addressed properly, as they hinder children's optimal growth and development according to their age stages. In the long term, these issues will result in the failure to produce a high-quality generation capable of contributing positively, playing an active role in national development, and competing at the international level.

The early childhood period is a critical stage in forming the foundation for holistic human growth and development, as well as laying the groundwork for a child's future. Therefore, early childhood is often referred to as the *golden period*. It is a crucial and irreplaceable period that will not occur again at any other stage of life. During early childhood, the brain develops rapidly, reaching 80–90% of its adult capacity. (Papalia Olds, S.W., Feldman, R.D, 2008). This means that around 80 to 90 percent of the brain's size and functional abilities in early childhood are already approaching that of an adult brain, or in other words, 80 to 90 percent of the brain's total maximum capacity develops during this period.

This brain development is related to cognitive abilities which are the capital of children's intelligence and capital for children in solving problems experienced in their lives, language skills and socializing with the environment around children. In addition to the rapid development of the child's brain at the early childhood stage, the child also experiences physical growth and rapid learning and socio-emotional development.

Physical development in children is seen from the growth of the forerunner of the child's body organs experiencing important developments since 8 weeks of fertilization continues until the age of 2 years.

The development of early childhood organs is still flexible and sensitive to the environment over time this flexibility and functional capacity in children's organs will be permanent. While the learning and socio-emotional development of early childhood is seen from the sensitivity and high imitation ability in capturing and receiving stimulation and stimulation from the environment. Nutritional adequacy in toddlers is a very important factor in optimizing growth and development in the golden period of children. Handling nutritional problems in early childhood can start from the closest environment to the child, namely the family.

Based on the ecological theory of education proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Morrison 2012), the child development environment is a multi-layered system including



microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems. The microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is the setting in which the individual lives. This context includes the individual's family, peers, school and neighborhood. In this microsystem, the most direct interactions with social agents take place, for example with parents, peers and teachers. The individual is not seen as a passive recipient of experience but someone who helps build the setting

Parents are in the first of the five layers of the child's environment, namely in the microsystem layer Parents are the closest and most direct environment where children's daily activities and child interactions take place effectively. The amount, type and quality of early childhood food intake is highly dependent on parents, so the quality of parents' food literacy greatly affects the quality of nutrition consumed by children.

The family is the closest environment to the child where the child spends most of the time and where intensive and continuous interaction occurs in children. The family is the first and main learning environment for children in training thinking skills, developing basic competencies and shaping children's habits, character and personality. Therefore, it is important for families to equip early childhood with food literacy skills. Food literacy for early childhood equips children not only with the knowledge of what food is but an understanding of healthy and nutritionally balanced food needed to grow healthy and build awareness of the benefits and impacts of various types of food on children's personal health and environmental sustainability in the future. Food literacy can help children learn about how to prepare food and do so with confidence and a sense of responsibility, as well as foster a positive attitude towards food, so that children view food not only as something that must be eaten, but as something that can be enjoyed, appreciated, learned, and needed for optimal growth and development. Food literacy skills introduced from early childhood will shape the development of healthy eating habits, which are much easier to form when children start early, so that they will be embedded and carried into adulthood. The family plays a strategic role in this development.

Unfortunately, not all families have good food literacy, that is, they do not have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes towards food. As a result, families are unable to select and serve healthy and nutritionally balanced food options for their children as well as provide understanding and model appropriate attitudes towards food in early childhood. It is therefore important to look at how food literacy develops in families and how it affects the way children learn about food from an early age and to explore the role of families in introducing and building food literacy in early childhood.

METHOD

The method used in this scientific study is to conduct a literature review of books containing the basic concepts of food literacy and early childhood characteristics as well as guidebooks, reports and articles in research journals relevant to the research objectives within the last 10 years. The procedure carried out is to study in depth the basic concepts of food literacy and early childhood characteristics from reference books linked to the strategic functions and roles of families in shaping the understanding of food literacy in early childhood contained in research journals over the past 10 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the literature review, it was found that the concept of food literacy is a comprehensive and in-depth individual ability that includes knowledge,

skills and attitudes about nutrition, culture, information and food systems, as well as their impact on health, the environment and the economy. This is manifested in conscious, logical, responsible and confident behavior in selecting, managing, preparing and consuming nutritious food in a healthy, safe and sustainable manner.

This concept refers to the opinions of expert figures and world food organizations. The Food literacy center (2019) in the Sacramento region, defines food literacy as a person's ability to understand the impact of the food choices he or she makes on health, the environment and the economy, including an understanding of the different impacts that each person has on the food he or she consumes. The concept of food literacy put forward by the Food Literacy Center emphasizes a person's ability to understand the impact of food choices on health, environment and economy. The food organization believes that an environment where people have good food literacy will make the right choices from the food they consume and will contribute positively to health, environment and economy. In line with the Food Literacy Center, the International Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) also promotes food literacy as a way to support food security and sustainability, starting at the family level.

Paula Silva(2023), in a journal listed on the official website of the National Library of Medicine National Center for Biotechnology Information provides a definition of food literacy as the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to make informed decisions about food and its impact on health.

Vidgen, Helen A. & Gallegos (2016) Danielle Based on the Delphi Study Outcome Report which is the first of three studies commissioned by Health Promotion Queensland,

Concluded that the definition of food literacy is the subjective capacity to fundamentally understand the basic principles of food and how important food is to a person and how much a person is able to get information about food, process it, analyze it, and behave using the guidance of that information.

Based on the definition of food literacy in the official website of Alberta Health Services, food literacy is a broader set of actions, skills and mindsets about food and nutrition that are inherent in a person that will be carried for a lifetime by a person like a healthy eating toolbox.

Lauren G. Block(2016) in an article entitled From Nutrients to Nurturance: A Conceptual Introduction to Food Well-Being provides a definition of food literacy as a broader concept than just knowledge about food owned by a person but also involves an element of motivation in applying nutritional information to the type of food chosen for consumption.

Based on the definitions of food literacy that have been delivered by experts and organizations that have the scope of health, nutrition and food, it can be concluded that food literacy is a comprehensive and in-depth individual competence that includes knowledge, skills and behavior in selecting, managing, preparing and consuming nutritious food in a healthy, safe and sustainable manner.

Food literacy is not only related to nutrition, but also includes understanding food information, food systems, culture, and critical thinking skills in making conscious and responsible decisions that support personal and environmental health.

Simply and fundamentally, food literacy relates to an individual's ability to know and understand basic food concepts, master skills in food preparation, have knowledge about the nutrients in food and the reasons why healthy and nutritious food is important for our growth and well-being, be able to make informed, logical and critical decisions



about food and be able to develop a positive attitude towards food. Together, these skills help us build healthier habits starting from an early age.

Food literacy in parents of young children is influenced by internal factors (such as parents' education level, parents' knowledge about nutrition and parents' beliefs and perceptions about what healthy food means), external factors (such as media influence, local culture and traditions, family economic situation, food and social policies and the type of support parents receive - from health workers, schools or communities) and another important factor is parenting - how parents guide and interact with their children, especially at mealtimes.

Parents who engage their children in food-related activities such as grocery shopping, cooking, or simply chatting about food, tend to build stronger food literacy in their children. Families have a very important role in developing food literacy in early childhood.

The first role of the family is to improve the food literacy of the family, especially parents. Parents' knowledge, attitudes and habits around food have a direct impact on their children. When parents understand nutrition, know how to prepare healthy food and make wise food choices, their children tend to follow the same pattern.

In other words, the higher the food literacy of parents, the greater the chances of their children developing food literacy as well just by living and learning together every day. This role is supported by the results of a study conducted by Xu, Cai, Zhang and Xia (2024) published in *Nutrients*. The study found that it is important for parents to improve their food literacy, as this has a significant impact on their children's food literacy development. In fact, the study showed that this effect was even stronger when there was a positive relationship between parents and children, and when children felt motivated to learn. The conclusion of this study is that what parents know, how they connect with their children, and how they engage children are all important in shaping food literacy in children. Another study that supports the importance of improving food literacy in families especially parents comes from Nurhayati, Patriasih, Mahmudahtusaadah, and Nurani (2024). This study also showed that improving parents' nutritional literacy is very important, especially in the context of caring for millennial children today. The study found that parents' limited knowledge about food and nutrition can contribute to poor feeding practices, which in turn increases the risk of stunting in early childhood.

Both studies show how parents' knowledge and how they apply that knowledge makes a real difference in their children's health and development.

The second role of family is that parents play an important role as role models in influencing their children's dietary behaviors and food-related attitudes. (Mahmood: 2021), Linde (2022), Green (2021). Jatmikowati (2023).

Children don't just listen to what we say they watch what we do. So when parents eat healthy food, enjoy cooking, and show a positive attitude toward food, children are more likely to copy those behaviors. This everyday modelling like choosing fruits over snacks, or sitting down for family meals has a big impact on how children think about food and develop their own habits. In short, parents set the tone for their children's relationship with food—by leading through example.

There are several studies that support the idea that parents serve as powerful role models when it comes to shaping their children's eating habits. For example, Mahmood et al. (2021) found that parental dietary behaviors and practices have a strong influence on children's eating patterns. In other words, the way parents eat and the habits they build at home are often mirrored by their children.

Another study by Linde et al. (2022) from the NU-HOME study showed that parental role modeling is positively associated with children's diet quality, especially in rural areas. Green, Spivak, and Dollahite (2021) explored how early adolescents develop food routines, and their study highlighted that family patterns and parental involvement shape how children relate to food from a young age. And in the Indonesian context, Jatmikowati et al. (2023) emphasized the combined role of teachers and parents in building healthy eating habits in early childhood through daily routines and positive reinforcement. All these studies point to one conclusion what parents do around food matters a lot. Children are watching, learning, and copying. So, being a good role model can truly make a difference.

The third role of the family is as the main food provider in the home. Several studies support this idea for example, a study by Gerritsen et al. (2018) found that family involvement in meals - such as cooking together or involving children in food preparation - was associated with healthier eating habits in preschool-aged children.

Another study by Yee, Lwin, and Ho (2017), a systematic review and meta-analysis, showed that positive parental practices such as encouraging children to try new foods or offering healthy food choices strongly influenced children's promotive and preventive eating behaviors. In addition, Balantekin et al. (2020) reviewed the impact of positive parenting approaches and found that supportive and engaged parents tend to raise children with better eating habits and healthier weight over time.

In conclusion, being the primary food provider is not just a routine task but a learning moment. Every grocery shopping trip, every meal choice, and every family dinner is an opportunity to support children's food literacy.

The fourth role of the family is as the primary source of the most immediate, ongoing and consistent education about food, nutrition and healthy habits. Family involvement acts as a positive role model in family eating habits in the form of eating together, breakfast routines encourage healthy eating habits in early childhood. When families take time to eat together, encourage them to try new foods, and show enjoyment when eating healthy foods, children tend to develop a positive relationship with food. Simple things like eating breakfast together every morning or involving children in meal preparation can build strong and sustainable habits. This fact proves that home is not just a place to eat but a place where lifelong food values are formed.

Before children learn about nutrition at school, they learn at home by simply observing what their parents eat, how food is prepared, and how food is talked about. Since parents are with their children every day, they have the strongest influence over time. Through daily routines such as eating breakfast together, preparing lunch, or talking about food while shopping the family provides ongoing learning experiences that help children build food literacy naturally.

The conclusion is that the home is the first nutrition classroom, and parents are the first nutrition teachers. One study that supports this is from Gerritsen, Anderson, Morton, and Wall (2018). In their study, they found that nutrition-related behaviors at home such as family meals, routines, and positive role models play an important role in shaping children's eating habits, even more than what they learn in early childhood education centers. This means that what happens at home has a lasting impact-because it is consistent, repetitive, and emotionally connected to children's daily lives. This research confirms that the family is the most consistent and powerful source of early food education.



The key points found from the literature review are first, children's food literacy is strongly influenced by the family environment. The way parents eat, talk about food and engage their children in food-related activities greatly shapes the way children learn and think about food. Second, food literacy education is most effective when introduced early in life. Childhood is a great time to build healthy habits; it's when children are most open to learning and forming lifelong routines. Third, active parental involvement makes a big difference. When parents take the time to involve their children in cooking, meal planning, or even simple conversations about food, children develop a stronger understanding of healthy food choices. All these insights lead to one main idea: families are at the heart of early food literacy development.

IMPLICATIONS

Important implications derived from the results of the literature review are firstly the need to integrate food literacy into early childhood education. Second, teaching children about food should not only be done at home but should also be part of what they learn at school, in a fun and age-appropriate way. Thirdly, education programs for parents about nutrition and food are very important. When parents are well informed, they are better equipped to guide their children. Capacity building programs that support the improvement of parents' food literacy such as workshops, community sessions, or even online resources can be very helpful. Fourth is the need to strengthen the role of families in healthy eating campaigns. Campaigns that involve families, not just individuals, but all parties close to the early childhood environment are very helpful. Parents, caregivers and even siblings should be involved in these activities. Strong food literacy capacity will be achieved through good integration and collaboration between the whole family at home, at school and in the community.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of this review is that food literacy in early childhood is essential for long-term health. The earlier children learn about food, the better chance they have of growing up with healthy habits that last a lifetime. Families play a central role in shaping eating habits. Parents are the first and most consistent influence and what they model at home is critical to the development of food literacy in early childhood.

Collaboration between educational institutions and families is essential. When schools and families work together, children get stronger and more consistent messages about healthy eating. So in the end, building food literacy is not just about teaching children-it's about empowering families, engaging schools and creating a supportive enviro In conclusion, food literacy is more than just knowing what to eat it is about building a healthy and positive relationship with food, starting early in life.

When children are taught early at home, at school and in the community, not only will they grow up healthy but they will grow up aware, confident and able to make good choices for themselves and for the environment around them. Developing food literacy capacity in early childhood starts with parents, educators and communities working together to cultivate this knowledge and awareness. Because when we nurture children's minds and bodies through food literacy, we are not only feeding them for today but preparing them for a better future.nment where healthy habits can grow.

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EM BETUNGAN_ TERPUSAT_ STRATEGI_ MELESTARI

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