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Interventions for Managing Picky Eating in Preschool Children: Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Picky eating in children is a widespread issue that can affect growth and development. Factors contributing to picky eating include parental influence, early feeding practices, and environmental conditions. Addressing picky eating behavior is crucial to prevent long-term negative effects on children's nutrition and health.

Objective: This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions, such as sensory education, parent training, oral interventions, massage, and diet adjustments, in improving picky eating behavior in children.

Method: A review of 15 studies published between 2013 and 2023 was conducted, focusing on intervention programs for children aged 1-6 years. The studies were selected from databases like PubMed, Science Direct, and Google Scholar.

Result: Sensory education helped reduce food rejection by familiarizing children with new foods. Parent training, including cooking classes and the Baby Led Weaning (BLW) method, effectively reduced picky eating. Oral interventions, such as herbal remedies and appetite-enhancing supplements, showed positive outcomes. Massage techniques like Tui Na and tailored dietary plans also contributed to better eating habits in both underweight and overweight children.

Conclusion: Interventions including sensory education, parental training, oral treatments, massage, and diet modifications can significantly improve eating behaviors in picky eater children, promoting healthier nutrition and growth.

Keywords: Picky Eater; Sensory Education; Parent Training; Oral Intervention

INTRODUCTION

Picky Eater (PE) is a common issue in children's eating behavior, where they tend to reject or express dislike for certain foods, especially new ones (1). According to research by Yalcin, the characteristics of PE children are often clearly observable. PE children tend to be thinner than their peers, although some may also be at risk of obesity. Working parents who also exhibit picky eating behavior are more likely to have PE children. Moreover, excessive screen time and the habit of consuming sweet, salty snacks and packaged drinks contribute to this issue (2).

Taylor and Emmett identified three main causes of PE: problems before and during pregnancy, issues in early feeding phases, and feeding challenges during the second year of life. Parental factors such as smoking, inadequate nutrition, or low socioeconomic status during pregnancy can increase the likelihood of a child developing PE. Premature birth or low birth weight (LBW) are also commonly associated with PE. Additionally, improper feeding practices, such as introducing solid foods too early or late or failing to offer a variety of textures, can worsen picky eating behavior (3).

A healthy parent-child relationship plays a crucial role in addressing PE behavior. Parents' sensitivity to their child's eating habits significantly influences their ability to seek solutions, such as repeatedly offering new foods or consulting healthcare providers. A lack of parental awareness and responsiveness can lead to PE behavior persisting until the child is 4-6 years old (4).

The prevalence of PE varies across countries, ranging from 9-50%. In Taiwan, PE prevalence reached 62% (5), while in Malaysia, it was 31.9% (6). In Indonesia, the prevalence of PE among toddlers in Semarang was 60.3% (7), and in Jember, it was 46.2% (8).

Early interventions, including sensory education, parent training, oral interventions, massage, and dietary management, are crucial in preventing the long-term effects of PE.

METHOD

This study conducted a literature review to explore interventions for picky eating in children. The process began by identifying two main research questions: 1) What are the key intervention concepts for managing picky eating in children, and 2) What are the outcomes of these interventions? Articles were sourced between November 13–26, 2023, from academic publication websites, including PubMed, Science Direct, and Google Scholar. Keywords used for the searches included "picky eater in children," "picky eater management" for Indonesian articles, and "intervention picky eater" for international studies.

Inclusion criteria focused on intervention studies published from 2013–2023, with respondents being preschool children aged 1-6 years and parents of picky eaters. The studies had to report behavior changes in children and nutritional improvements, along with successful intervention outcomes. A total of 15 articles meeting these criteria were collected and reviewed, documenting the article titles, authors, publication years, countries, and key findings. The data were categorized under two themes: 1) types of interventions and 2) outcomes of the interventions, which are discussed further in the results and discussion sections.

RESULTS

Table 1. Article Search Results

No	Researcher	Year	Journal Name	Title	Results
1	L. Garcia, Emma Brown, Tom Goodale, Mairi mclachlan and Alison Parrett (9)	2020	Nutrients	A Nursery-Based Cooking Skills Programme with Parents and Children Reduced Food Fussiness and Increased Willingness to Try Vegetables: A Quasi-Experimental Study	Cooking activities or preparing meals together with children, when conducted repeatedly, have a positive impact on children's eating behavior. Children who participate in food preparation show a decrease in their fussy eating status and are more willing to eat vegetables compared to those in the control group who did not receive the intervention.
2	Kimberley M. Mallan, phd; Alison Fildes, phd; Anthea M. Magarey, phd; Lynne A. Daniels (10)	2015	Journal of the academy of nutrition and dietetics	The relationship between Number of fruits, vegetables, and noncore foods tried at age 14 months and Food Preferences, Dietary Intake	Trying fewer vegetables (P=0.030) at 14 months is associated with higher fussiness scores at 3.7 years. After adjusting for fussiness scores (P<0.001) at 14 months, the percentages of consumption are 82% for

				Patterns, Fussy Eating Behavior, and Weight Status at Age 3.7 Years	vegetables, 78% for fruits, and 47% for non-core foods.
3	Helen Coulthard and Anne-Marie Sealy (11)	2017	Appetite	Play with your food! Sensory play is associated with tasting of fruits and vegetables in preschool children	There is a significant influence of children participating in sensory play on their willingness to taste food.
4	Pernilla Sandvik, Anna Ek, Karin Eli, Maria Somaraki, Matteo Bottai dan Paulina Nowicka (12).	2019	BMC	Picky eating in an obesity intervention for preschool-aged children – what role does it play, and does the measurement instrument matter?	Children identified as picky eaters and diagnosed with obesity underwent nutritional counseling by a dietitian over the course of 10 weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. This intervention significantly reduced their picky eating behaviors, particularly when parents were also involved in the program, receiving guidance on parenting approaches and lifestyle modifications. Engaging parents in the intervention not only enhanced the effectiveness of the nutritional guidance but also fostered a supportive environment that encouraged healthier eating habits within the family.
5	Apurba K. Ghosh, Bala Kishore , Irfan Shaikh , Vinita Satyavrat , Anil Kumar , Tapan Shah , Prahlad Pote, Sandeep Shinde , Yatin Berde , Yen Ling Low, Verena M.H. Tan and Dieu T. T. Huynh (13).	2018	Sage	Effect of oral nutritional supplementation on growth and recurrent upper respiratory tract infections in picky eating children at nutritional risk: a randomized, controlled trial	Oral supplementation has been shown to positively affect children's appetite and contribute to weight gain while also reducing the incidence of respiratory tract infections (RTIs). This suggests that oral supplementation can be an effective intervention for improving children's nutritional status and overall health.
6	Chandani Nekitsing, msc; Pam Blundell-Birtill, phd (14).	2019	Journal of the academy of nutrition and dietetics	Increasing Intake of an Unfamiliar Vegetable in Preschool Children Through Learning Using Storybooks and Sensory Play: A Cluster Randomized Trial	There is an interaction observed between the use of storybooks about food and sensory play, which resulted in children being more receptive to the combination of sensory play conditions compared to other conditions (OR 3.25; 95% CI 1.47 to 7.23; $\chi^2 [1] = 9.45$; $P = 0.002$). The findings indicate that integrating storybooks and sensory play can effectively encourage children to consume celeriac. This approach not only enhances children's willingness to try new foods but also fosters a positive attitude toward healthy eating.
7	Rosalie Mourmans , Britt Fleischeuer, Pauline Dibbets, Katrijn Houben, Chantal Nederkoorn (15)	2023	Appetite	Choice-induced tasting. Evaluating the effect of choice on children's acceptance of an unfamiliar vegetable	Allowing children to choose their own foods based on their preferences can enhance their appetite and positively impact both normally developing children and those who are picky eaters.

					This autonomy in food selection fosters a sense of ownership over their eating habits, encouraging them to explore new flavors and textures. Additionally, it may lead to more positive eating experiences, which can help reduce food aversions and promote healthier dietary choices over time.
8	Carlos Alberto Nogueira-de-Almeida, Luiz Antonio Del Ciampo, Edson Zangiacomi Martinez, Andrea Aparecida Contini, Maria Eduarda Nogueira-de-Almeida, Ivan Savioli Ferraz, Matias Epifanio dan Fabio da Veiga Ued (16).	2023	MDPI Children	Clinical Evolution of Preschool Picky Eater Children Receiving Oral Nutritional Supplementation during Six Months: A Prospective Controlled Clinical Trial	There was no indication of a change in the picky eating behavior of the children; however, there was an improvement in their nutritional status. This suggests that while the children may still exhibit selective eating habits, the interventions may have successfully contributed to better overall nutrition, indicating that other aspects of their dietary intake could be positively influenced despite their ongoing food preferences.
9	Ulla Hoppu, Mira Prinz, Pauliina Ojansivu, Oskar Laaksonen dan Mari A. Sandell (17)	2015	Food & nutrition	Impact of sensory-based food education in kindergarten on willingness to eat vegetables and berries	Food selectivity, particularly regarding vegetables, is very common among children. This study indicates that sensory education has proven effective in enhancing children's appetite for consuming fruits and vegetables. By engaging children in sensory experiences related to food, they become more open to trying new flavors and textures, ultimately fostering healthier eating habits.
10	Klelia Karagiannaki, Christian Ritz, Louise Grønhøj Hørbye Jensen, Ellen Hyldgaard Tørsleff, Per Møller, Helene Hausner, dan Annemarie Olsen (18)	2021	MDPI foods	Optimising Repeated Exposure: Determining Optimal Exposure Frequency for Introducing a Novel Vegetable among Children	Repeated exposure to different types of fruits and vegetables, particularly new vegetables, among children aged 3 to 6 years showed an increase in preference scores at the 6-month follow-up compared to baseline. This indicates that even the control group, with low frequency and small quantities, may be sufficient to significantly enhance acceptance of unfamiliar vegetables.
11	Anif Munjida Rahayu (19).	2020	Jurnal Kesehatan Masyarakat	The Influence of Implementing Feeding Rules as an Effort to Address Eating Difficulties in Children (Picky Eater, Selective Eater, and Small Eater)	The implementation of feeding rules has a significant impact on children with picky eater behavior and children with small eater behavior, but it does not have a substantial effect on children with selective eater behavior.
12	Kartika Swarnasari Kusuma, Nurry Ayuningtyas Kusumastuti (20).	2021	Nusantara Hasanah Journal	The Influence of Temulawak Pudding on Eating Difficulties in Toddlers Aged 2-5	The administration of temulawak pudding is effective in addressing eating difficulties experienced by toddlers in the Kuta Bumi area.

				Years in Kuta Bumi in 2021	
13	Carissa Theresia Puspita, Rany Adelina (21)	Cerdasari, 2018	Indonesian Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics	Effect of “Bento” preparation training on mothers knowledge, skill, and child’s picky eating	Training parents to make bento can enhance mothers' knowledge and skills in preparing a variety of foods, thereby reducing eating difficulties in children.
14	Mela Yusnita Maelani, Sinar Pertiwi, Qanita Wulandara (22).	2020	Journal of Midwifery Information	The Influence of MP-ASI Administration Using the Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) Method on Picky Eater Behavior in Toddlers Aged 12-24 Months in RW 015 and RW 016, Kahuripan Village, Tawang District, Tasikmalaya City in 2020.	There is a difference in the behavior of children with picky eater tendencies before and after the Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) method is applied.
15	Reni Anggraeni (23).	2021	Web of Confereces	The Effect Of Tui Na Massage On Increasing Appetite In Toddlers At Ami Medika Clinic, Sukabumi District	There is an influence of tui na massage on the success of behavior changes in children.

The results of the identification conducted on 15 articles regarding interventions for picky eating behavior revealed several factors related to the interventions for picky eaters. These factors include providing sensory education, training for parents, oral interventions, massage techniques, and dietary modifications. Each of these interventions plays a crucial role in addressing picky eating behavior and improving children’s eating habits.

DISCUSSION

The discussion in this study emphasizes the critical role of educational institutions and parental attitudes in shaping children’s eating behaviors, particularly in addressing picky eating tendencies. Educational settings and homes serve as fundamental environments where children first encounter food. Sensory education, commonly implemented by schools and parents, has shown to be an effective method to introduce a variety of foods to picky eaters. By allowing children to explore and play with food items, sensory play encourages them to develop positive relationships with new and unfamiliar foods. Which demonstrated that sensory play, including non-food sensory activities, significantly improved children’s willingness to try vegetables and fruits ($p < 0.001$) (4).

In addition to sensory play, storytelling through picture books is another effective strategy employed within the context of sensory education. Demonstrated that when children were exposed to storybooks about food and were allowed to touch and taste the foods they saw, there was a significant increase in their willingness to try new foods (odds ratio of 3.25). This method provides an engaging and interactive way for children to familiarize themselves with different foods. By integrating such educational techniques, both schools and parents can work collaboratively to positively influence children’s eating habits, especially in reducing their tendencies to be picky eaters (24).

The involvement of parents in sensory education and intervention strategies is equally crucial. Parental engagement, through activities such as cooking contests with children or the preparation of visually appealing meals like bento, demonstrates a significant impact on children’s eating behaviors. Studies have shown that these hands-on approaches decrease picky eating scores significantly (2,6). These activities not only help children become more comfortable with different types of food but also strengthen the parent-child bond, which is an essential aspect of reinforcing positive eating habits.

Moreover, parental training programs that incorporate methods like the Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) approach have shown promise in reducing picky eating behaviors in young children. By allowing infants to explore and grasp food in its natural form, BLW helps familiarize children with various textures and tastes, promoting an acceptance of diverse diets early on (10). Such interventions demonstrate that early and consistent exposure to healthy foods during complementary feeding stages is pivotal in preventing picky eating habits from developing as children grow older.

Cultural and traditional approaches also play a significant role in managing picky eating behaviors. Oral interventions, such as the administration of traditional remedies like temulawak pudding, have demonstrated effectiveness in improving children's appetites and eating patterns (11). This reflects the importance of integrating culturally relevant methods when designing interventions, as such practices are more likely to be accepted and sustained within communities familiar with these traditional remedies.

In addition to oral interventions, massage therapy, particularly tui na massage, has been shown to be an effective traditional method for increasing children's appetites. Anggraeni reported a significant effect of tui na massage ($p=0.000$) in enhancing appetite among children. The acceptance and popularity of massage in rural areas demonstrate how traditional practices remain valuable, especially in regions where natural and low-risk interventions are preferred by communities. This emphasizes the need for a culturally sensitive approach when developing interventions to support picky eaters and their families (1).

Dietary routines and the visual presentation of food also have substantial impacts on children's eating behaviors. Establishing structured mealtime routines, combined with presenting food in visually appealing ways, encourages children to try new foods and maintain balanced diets. Munjidah & Rahayu found that consistent feeding rules significantly influence picky eating behaviors ($p=0.03$). These findings support the importance of regular meal schedules and structured environments in forming healthy eating habits in children (25).

Finally, the study discusses the relationship between picky eating and childhood obesity. The tendency of picky eaters to prefer fast foods or other high-calorie options raises concerns about their nutritional status and weight management. Sandvik highlighted the importance of addressing picky eating behaviors as part of obesity prevention programs for children, showing that guided interventions can significantly improve vegetable intake. This connection underscores the need for a holistic approach in developing interventions that not only increase children's acceptance of diverse foods but also promote a balanced, nutritious diet to prevent long-term health risks associated with childhood obesity (20).

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of picky eating in children should not be overlooked, as it can lead to significant negative impacts on their growth and development in the long term. It is crucial for parents to recognize whether their children's eating behaviors align with healthy norms or require intervention. Effective strategies to address picky eating include sensory education, parental training, oral interventions, massage techniques, and a balanced diet.

By implementing these interventions, parents can help their children develop a more varied and healthy diet. Sensory education can introduce children to new foods through playful experiences, while parental training equips caregivers with the skills needed to create appealing and nutritious meals. Combined, these approaches can promote healthier eating habits and ensure children receive the essential nutrients needed for their growth and well-being.

SUGGESTION

The issue of picky eating poses significant challenges to the growth and development of children, potentially leading to long-term nutritional deficiencies and behavioral issues if not addressed early. Parents play a crucial role in recognizing and responding to their children's eating behaviors. It is essential for parents to identify the signs of picky eating and implement appropriate interventions to ensure their children receive a balanced and varied diet. Recommended interventions include sensory education, which helps children become familiar with different foods in an engaging and non-threatening manner, and parental training programs that equip parents with strategies to encourage healthy eating habits.

Additionally, oral interventions, such as supplements or traditional remedies, can be used to stimulate children's appetite and improve their willingness to try new foods. Traditional practices like massage (e.g., tui na) may also be beneficial in enhancing children's appetite and overall health, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts. Structured dietary routines, coupled with appealing food presentations, should also be emphasized as they have been shown to significantly influence children's eating behaviors.

Implementing these strategies comprehensively is expected to promote optimal growth and development in children by ensuring their nutritional needs are met. Collaboration between educational institutions, healthcare providers, and parents is necessary to effectively address picky eating behaviors and create supportive environments that foster positive eating habits from an early age.

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