

Original Research Article

Perceived influences of food consumption among Indian preparatory school children: A qualitative study

Manisha Kanwar* & Kalpana Gupta

Department of Home Science

Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Abstract

Eating behaviour of children determines their state of nutrition and risk of many degenerative diseases in their adulthood. Therefore the present study was planned in order to find out the existing eating behaviour of children and causative factors behind it. It was done using structured questionnaire and interview method. Children were asked to draw about their liked foods and disliked foods. By this, researcher came to know that most of the children liked sugary drinks and fruit juices, junk foods more in comparison to fruits and vegetables. The main etiological factor behind this was TV ads and peer pressure. Some were influenced by family eating environment as well. Easy accessibility was also one of the main causative factors for their food choices. Children were having healthy food just because it was mandatory to bring healthy food only in school lunch boxes. Thus the research was very interesting that can be used to improve children's eating behaviour or their perception towards healthy or junk foods in a positive manner.

Keywords: Children, healthy food, junk food, food perception

***Correspondence**

Ms. Manisha Kanwar
manishakanwar2000@gmail.com
Department of Home Science,
Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India

Received: 5 January 2025 - Accepted: 20 February 2025 - Published: 21 March 2025

Citation for the paper: Kanwar M, Gupta K. Perceived influences of food consumption among Indian preparatory school children: A qualitative study. International Journal of Nutrition & Lifestyle 2025; 5(1): 1 - 9. DOI: 10.69859/ijnl.2025.v5i1001



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee: Research Thrive Publications. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Introduction

Role of nutrition is very well known in maintaining fitness throughout life (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003). The rising incidences of childhood obesity have dragged attention of all researchers as healthy lifestyle interventions from childhood only, can prevent long-term health consequences. Consumption of energy-dense junk foods is major cause of childhood obesity (Larson et al., 2016). Unhealthy diet and sedentary lifestyle is a major etiological factor for obesity (Ebbeling et al., 2004; Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2013). Sugar loaded drinks such as processed juice and cold drinks are the main sources of excess calorie intake among children (Bailey et al., 2018). Today, children are following faulty diet globally that contains high sugar, fat and sodium and lacks fibre rich natural foods (UNICEF, 2019).

Attractive food packaging and advertisements on television (TV ads) also affect food choices and purchasing behavior significantly (Bublitz & Paracchio, 2015).

Early childhood lifestyle plays a remarkable role for health status in later adulthood (Grimm et al., 2014). The intake of adequate diet is very important during childhood is of much importance (Mahan et al., 2012).

Many factors put impact on consumption of natural and fibre rich foods such as fruit and vegetables (F&V) in childhood. These factors are child's age, gender, habitat, and socioeconomic status, literacy level of parents, diet patterns, home environment, perception and knowledge about different types of foods. Family meal time is also important in inculcating food choices in children as they follow their parents as their role models.

Dietary intake leads to obesity if portion sizes, meal composition and frequency is controlled in relation to physical activity. These dietary habits of initial phase of life are carried forward in later adulthood also. Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand children's food behaviour.

Meal sharing and combined meals may improve food choices. Children should be given opportunity of decision making and meal preparation.

Objective

The objective of this qualitative inquiry is to explore the influences on dietary behaviour of preparatory school children from the perspective of children

Research Methodology

Study design

This qualitative inquiry was informed by the social constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Using a phenomenological framework, the researchers aim to comprehend the perceptions of respondents regarding the topic under examination. These perceptions are informed by participants' life experiences (Creswell, 2009). A checklist based on 32-items given in the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) was used to collect data on children's perception towards different types of foods (Tong et al., 2007).

Sample selection

Children between the ages of 8 to 11 years were investigated in this research. Purposive sampling method was used for sample selection. Samples were selected from private and government schools of urban and semi-urban areas of Varanasi.

Data collection

The aim of this paper was to understand children's perception on healthy and unhealthy food. Data was collected using interactive and participatory approach (Kinnear and Taylor, 1991; Morrow and Richards, 1996). A written consent/ assent form was provided to parents/ children before taking an interview. Children were asked to draw a picture of their favourite or least favourite food. The researcher also analyzed the reason for like/ dislike for some particular type of food. It was a good method to involve children in the interaction (Gelman, 2009). A semi-structured interview, which was conducted in Hindi, was audio recorded (King, 2004a). An interview guide (Table 1) composed of open-ended questions was used to conduct the interviews. Children recruitment for the study proceeded until interview data reached thematic saturation, signifying the point at which

no new themes emerged in subsequent interviews. In this case, thematic saturation was reached at the 22th interview. Interview was taken face-to-face in a comfortable environment where no one no one else was present to disturb or influence thoughts of the child and the interviewer.



Fig. 1 Drawing of foods by a child

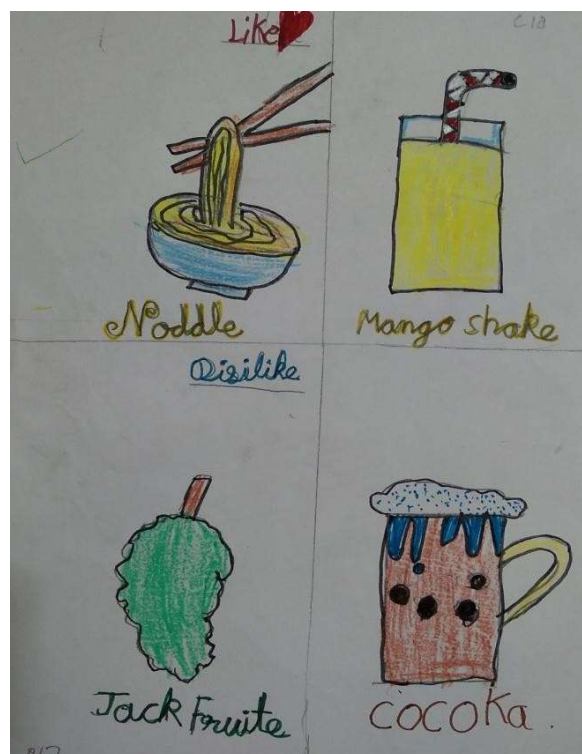


Fig. 2 Drawing of foods by another child

Q 1.	What is your most favorite and least favorite food item? And why?
Q 2.	What is your most favorite and least favorite beverage? And why?
Q 3.	What kind of food you take in your tiffin to school?
Q 4.	Is there any food which your parents insist you to eat?
Q 5.	Is there any food which you feel like eating after watching it on TV, Mobile phone or anywhere outside?
Q 6.	Do you feel like eating the same food which your friends bring in their lunchbox?

Table 1: Interview Guide

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher verbatim and translated to English. Transcribed data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 10 software (QSR International Pvt Ltd., 2010), supplemented by manual coding. The thematic analysis of the transcribed data was conducted based on the Template Analysis technique introduced by King (2004b). This technique entails the creation of a template, comprising a set of codes, which reflects a priori themes identified in both the existing literature and the raw data. Descriptive thematic phrases or 'nodes' were established at the final stage of data analysis.

Results & Discussion

The students of 8 to 11 years (n= 22; Boys= 10; Girls= 12) identified a number of factors which they consider to influence their dietary behaviours. These factors are described below:

Taste: All the participants described that taste exerted a great influence over their food habits. They preferred unhealthy food because of mouth feel, texture and eye appealing. It highlights the relationship between taste preferences and dietary habits.

“Yes, Chole Chawal or Chole Bhature. I like them because they are spicy and flavourful.” (Participant 6) “Pizzas and burger. I like them because it is perfect in taste.” (Participant 11)

Family food environment: All the interviewees discussed that home environment plays a crucial role in shaping their nutrition and dietary habits. By exposing them to a variety of healthy options, parents help instill good eating habits early on. Additionally, the practice of avoiding purchasing nutrient- poor foods further reinforces the importance of healthy eating within the household. This underscores the influential role that parents can play in promoting balanced nutrition and overall well-being among children.

“Yes. I like their food. I feel like eating bitter gourd when I see my friends eating it. I eat it intentionally because everyone say that it is good for health my friends, mother, father, grandmother, all family members told me.” (Participant 7)

School food environment: Upper primary children considered school food environment

as an essential influence on their eating behaviour. More than half of the participants said that nutrition education is provided by the teachers in school. The school canteen was noted as a source of junk foods which led to frequent consumption of such foods, resulting in unhealthy eating habits among them.

“They (teachers) say that we should eat vegetables and fruits as they make us strong, that’s why we have a short break for eating the fruits in our second period of 5-10 minutes. So we can have fruits and dry fruits” (Participant 18). Few participants mentioned that consumption of junk food is prohibited in their school and therefore they had to bring healthy food in tiffin. Two of the participants attending government school claimed that healthy meals were provided during lunch time.

“We get food at school. we get khichdi, roti-dal, roti-sabji, rice-dal.” (Participant 9)

Advertisement: Both print and electronic media wield significant influence over children's food choices. The pervasive marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods can certainly contribute to unhealthy eating habits among this age group. Whether it's through eye-catching advertisements in magazines and newspapers or enticing commercials on television and social media, these messages can have a profound impact on young minds.

“Yes. I like to eat golgappa after watching on TV. I want to eat. I go with my grandfather. Golgappa is so good.” (Participant 15). “When I watch TV, there is an ad on TV regarding pizza burger, I want to eat pizza and burger instead of chana dal. So I told my mom that I want to eat pizza and not chana.” (Participant 20)

Influence of peers: Majority of the participants believed that peer influence plays a significant role in children’s food choices. This influence can stem from a variety of factors, including social dynamics, peer pressure, and a desire to fit in or conform to group norms. “Yes, once. My friend went to Zomato or something. He ate pizza there. He told me how he was feeling and what he ate with the food. I ate the same pizza.” (Participant 8)

Easy availability in the market: Half of the interviewees discussed about the easy

accessibility and availability of packed food in the market. Unhealthy foods tend to be highly processed, high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, which can make them more appealing to children's taste preferences. This easy accessibility to unhealthy foods can pose significant challenges for parents who are trying to promote healthy eating habits for children.

"I saw chips and kurkure at my maternal grandmother's house nearby market. cousin bought me this for the first time. We can easily find these packed foods everywhere nowadays." (Participant 9).

Bringing in perspectives of children, one can get a better idea of children's perception to food that affects their food preferences.

The results obtained from the present study highlight the importance of social and environmental factors that affect a child's eating behavior. Food marketing is also a leading influencer of a child's food preferences. There is a scope of future research on development of advertisements that can promote healthy eating practices, in contrast to unhealthy food. It's very important to understand a child's psychology behind selection of a particular type of food and rather than threatening the child with harmful effects of unhealthy diet, it would be more fruitful to derive positive methods to broaden their understanding of healthy diet.

The study was limited to the views of primary school children. Perceptions of other key stakeholders like parents and teachers need to be captured in future investigations. The study was limited to Varanasi. Therefore the emerging findings may not be generalized to other parts of India.

Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry presents primary school children's first hand perspectives on the factors influencing their dietary behaviour. The results indicate the taste preferences, the availability of junk food, aversion to healthy options, peer influence, home and school environments, and advertisement, all significantly impact their food choices. These findings underscore crucial focal points for implementing effective nutrition interventions aimed at enhancing the eating habits of Indian preparatory school children.

References

1. National Health and Medical Research Council. Encyclopedia of Australian Science and Innovation. Annual Reports and Accounts 2002/ 03 London
2. Larson LR, Jennings V, Cloutier SA. Public parks and well being in urban areas of the United States. PLOSone. 2016; 11(4): e0153211. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0153211>
3. Ebbeling CB, Sinclair KB, Pereira MA. Compensation for energy intake from fast food among overweight and lean adolescents. JAMA. 2004; 291(23): 2828- 2833. doi:10.1001/jama.291.23.2828
4. Rubin R. Profile: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation WA USA. The Lancet. 2017; 389(10068): 493
5. Bailey AP, Hetrick SE, Rosenbaum S, Purcell R, Parker AG. Treating depression with physical activity in adolescents and young adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. Psychol Med. 2018 May; 48(7): 1068-1083. doi: 10.1017/S0033291717002653.
6. UNICEF annual report. For every child, Reimagine. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/annual-report-2019>
7. Bublitz M, Paracchio LA. Applying industry practices to promote healthy foods: An exploration of positive marketing outcomes. Journal of Business Research. 2015; 68(12): DOI:10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.06.035
8. Grimm KA, Kim SA, Yaroch AL, Scanlon KS. Fruit and vegetable intake during infancy and early childhood. Pediatrics. 2014 Sep;1 34(Suppl 1): S63-9. doi: 10.1542/peds.2014-0646K.
9. Holt N, Kingsley BC, Tink LN, Scherer J. Benefits and challenges associated with sport participation by children and parents from low income families. Psychology of Sport and Exercise. 2011; 12(5): 490 – 499. DOI:10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.05.007
10. Mahan KL, Escott Stump S, Raymond JL. Krause's Food & The Nutrition Care Process. 13th Ed. Editor Yvonne A. Elsevier; 2012.ISBN : 1437722338
11. Denzin NK, Lincoln YS. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2011.
12. Creswell JW. Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2009.
13. Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. Int J Qual Health Care. 2007 Dec; 19(6): 349-57. doi: 10.1093/intqhc/mzm042.

14. Kinnear TC, Taylor JR. Marketing Research: An Applied Approach. Singapore: McGraw-Hill; 1991.
15. Morrow V, Richards M. The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children & Society*. 1996; 10(2): 90-105.
16. Gelman SA. Learning from others: Children's construction of concepts. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2009; 60: 115–140. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093659>
17. King N. Using Interviews in Qualitative Research. In: Cassel C, Symon G (Eds.), *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. SAGE Publications; 2004. p. 11-22.
18. QSR International. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 19:02, March 18, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=QSR_International&oldid=1264082311