

Parental Nutrition Profile among Parents of Children Aged 5–6 Years: A Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Parents play an important role in shaping children's eating environments through their nutrition knowledge and feeding practices. However, these two components may not develop at the same level and need to be described separately. Objective: This study aimed to describe the nutrition knowledge and feeding practices profiles of parents of children aged 5–6 years. A quantitative descriptive study with a cross-sectional design was conducted among 200 parents of children aged 5–6 years in public kindergartens in Makassar, Indonesia. Respondents were selected using quota sampling. Data were collected using an expert-validated questionnaire consisting of 18 nutrition knowledge items and 25 feeding practice items. Descriptive analysis was performed using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The overall nutrition knowledge score was 50.25%, indicating a low profile. The percentages of correct responses across the four domains ranged from 48.13% to 51.00%. In contrast, the overall feeding practices mean score was 2.61, indicating a moderate profile, with domain means ranging from 2.58 to 2.64. Parental Modeling showed the highest mean score (2.64), whereas Healthy Eating Guidance showed the lowest (2.58). Parents showed a low nutrition knowledge profile but moderate feeding practices. The findings indicate the importance of assessing nutrition knowledge and feeding practices as distinct components of the parental nutrition profile and provide a basis for strengthening parent-focused nutrition education and practical feeding support.

Keywords: parental nutrition; nutrition knowledge; feeding practices; preschool children; parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Nutrition during the preschool period is an important component of children's growth and development because eating habits, food preferences, and dietary behaviors are formed and strengthened during the early years of life. At this stage, children are increasingly exposed to different foods and eating situations, but their food choices remain strongly influenced by the family environment. Parents are generally the primary providers and gatekeepers of children's food, determining what foods are available, how food is introduced, and how children are guided during eating. Consequently, family practices constitute an important context for the development of children's eating behaviors and dietary quality (Prates et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Recent evidence also indicates that preschool children's dietary behavior is particularly responsive to parental and household influences compared with older children, making this developmental period an important target for nutrition promotion (Oudat et al., 2025; Xiang et al., 2021).

Within the family context, parental nutrition knowledge is one of the factors that may support appropriate decisions concerning children's food and dietary needs. Nutrition knowledge encompasses parents' understanding of basic nutrition concepts, food groups, nutrient functions, healthy dietary patterns, and the nutritional needs of children. Adequate knowledge can provide a cognitive basis for making informed food-related decisions; however, knowledge alone does not necessarily ensure that appropriate behaviors are consistently implemented in everyday family life. Research involving preschool-aged children has shown that parental nutrition knowledge and dietary behavior are related but may not always correspond directly, suggesting that the translation of knowledge into practice is influenced by other contextual conditions (Kostecka, 2022; Mazurkiewicz & Raczowska, 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant when examining parents' nutrition profiles because knowledge represents what parents understand, whereas feeding practices represent what parents actually do.

Parental feeding practices refer to the specific strategies and behaviors used by caregivers to manage children's eating, including what, when, and how food is offered and how children are guided during meals. Contemporary literature conceptualizes feeding practices as multidimensional and includes behaviors such as healthy eating guidance, monitoring, modeling, nutrition teaching, encouragement of variety, and involvement of children in food-related activities. Responsive practices such as modeling healthy food choices, monitoring intake, encouraging healthy eating, and providing opportunities for children to participate in food-related decisions have been associated with healthier eating environments, whereas coercive strategies such as excessive restriction and pressure to eat may be counterproductive (Srivastava et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Recent psychometric research further confirms that parental feeding practices cannot be adequately represented by a single behavioral dimension, as parents may simultaneously employ several strategies depending on the child, family context, and feeding situation (Şarahman-Kahraman et al., 2024).

The importance of assessing these practices is also evident from studies conducted in preschool populations. Research among parents of preschool children has identified healthy eating guidance and monitoring as common feeding practices, while other studies have demonstrated that parental feeding behaviors are associated with children's dietary patterns and consumption of particular food groups (Mazza et al., 2022; Prates et al., 2022). A recent Indonesian study also highlighted the relevance

of the home food environment and parental feeding practices in relation to preschool children's fruit and vegetable consumption, indicating that family-level factors remain important in the Indonesian context (Herawati et al., 2022). These findings suggest that understanding children's nutrition requires attention not only to the foods consumed by children but also to the knowledge and practices of the adults responsible for providing and guiding those foods.

Despite increasing evidence on parental feeding, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on associations between parental practices and child dietary intake, food preferences, eating behaviors, or weight status rather than providing a comprehensive descriptive profile of parents themselves (Mazurkiewicz & Raczkowska, 2024; Xiang et al., 2021). Second, nutrition knowledge and feeding practices are often examined separately, while an integrated description of both components may provide a more informative picture of the family nutrition context. Third, the conceptualization and measurement of parental feeding practices vary substantially across studies, with different instruments emphasizing monitoring, restriction, pressure, modeling, teaching, or involvement (Şarahman-Kahraman et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2022). This variation indicates the importance of explicitly defining the domains being assessed rather than treating parental feeding as a uniform behavior.

Another important consideration is that evidence from different cultural and socioeconomic settings cannot necessarily be assumed to represent Indonesian families. Family food practices are shaped by cultural norms, food availability, parental routines, socioeconomic circumstances, and interactions between parents and children. Recent literature emphasizes that the family and preschool environments jointly influence the development of healthy eating habits and that contextual factors may affect parents' ability to implement recommended feeding practices consistently (Niškanović et al., 2024; Oudat et al., 2025). Therefore, descriptive evidence from local populations is needed to identify the current profile of parents and to provide an empirical basis for developing contextually appropriate nutrition education and family-based support.

The preschool period is particularly relevant for such assessment because children aged 5–6 years are approaching the transition to formal schooling while continuing to experience substantial parental influence over food availability, meal routines, and food-related learning. At this age, children are increasingly capable of participating in food selection and simple food preparation, but parents remain central in shaping the family eating environment. A recent review emphasized the continuing influence of caregivers on preschoolers' eating behaviors and highlighted the need to consider caregivers' knowledge, beliefs, and feeding practices together with contextual barriers such as time, finances, and family routines (Oudat et al., 2025). Thus, profiling parental nutrition knowledge and feeding practices may help identify aspects that are relatively strong as well as areas requiring further educational or practical support.

Accordingly, the present study focuses on the Parental Nutrition Profile among Parents of Children Aged 5–6 Years by describing two distinct but complementary components: nutrition knowledge and feeding practices. Nutrition knowledge is assessed across general nutrition awareness, dietary habits, nutrient knowledge, and child nutrition, while feeding practices are described through healthy eating guidance, food monitoring, food variety and balance, parental modeling, nutrition teaching, and child involvement. The study uses a descriptive cross-sectional approach to

characterize these dimensions among parents of children aged 5–6 years in public kindergartens in Makassar, Indonesia. Rather than assuming that higher knowledge necessarily produces better practices, the study deliberately examines the two components as separate dimensions of the parental nutrition profile. This descriptive evidence is expected to provide a basis for identifying priority areas for parent-focused nutrition education and for strengthening collaboration between families and early childhood education settings in promoting healthy eating among young children.

METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with a descriptive design and a cross-sectional method (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study aims to describe the profile of nutritional knowledge and feeding practices of parents of children aged 5–6 years. Data collection was carried out in January–May 2026 at the State Kindergarten in Makassar City. The descriptive design was used because the study did not test the relationship or causation between variables (Usman et al., 2026). The use of descriptive design is also in line with research on parental nutritional knowledge, attitudes, and practices that use cross-sectional surveys to describe the state of knowledge and dietary practices in the parent group (Ma et al., 2023). In addition, research on feeding practices of parents of children aged 5–7 years also uses cross-sectional data to identify dimensions of feeding practices, such as intake monitoring, food restriction, pressure to eat, and healthy eating directions (Morris et al., 2023).

Population and Sample

The research population consisted of 500 students aged 5–6 years who were enrolled in State Kindergartens in Makassar City. The research sample amounted to 200 parents or guardians, with parents as the unit of analysis. Sampling was carried out using the quota sampling technique. Each respondent represented one child and was selected based on criteria: parents or guardians of children aged 5–6 years, responsible for providing children's food, willing to participate, and filling out a complete questionnaire.

Research Instruments

The Feeding Practices Profile instrument consists of 25 statements that measure parental feeding practices. Each statement is assessed using a four-level Likert scale, namely 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, and 4 = Always. This instrument includes six indicators, namely Healthy Eating Guidance as many as four items, Food Monitoring as many as four items, Food Variety and Balance as many as five items, Parental Modeling as many as four items, Nutrition Teaching as many as four items, and Child Involvement as many as four items.

The score of feeding practices is calculated based on the average score of the answers on each indicator and the overall average score. Higher average scores indicate that the feeding practices are more often reported to be implemented by parents. Analysis was conducted at the indicator and overall levels to obtain an idea of parental feeding practice patterns. The use of multiple indicators in measuring feeding practices is supported by research showing that parental feeding practices are a multidimensional concept. A validation study of the Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire in parents of children aged 5–7 years identified several

dimensions of feeding practices, including monitoring of food intake, pressure to eat, food restriction, regulation of emotions through food, and healthy eating directions (Morris et al., 2023). Other studies in parents of preschoolers also developed measurements that included behavioral modeling, fruit and vegetable consumption promotion, healthy food selection and preparation skills, and awareness of sugar and salt consumption (Almeida et al., 2021)

In this study, the average value of feeding practices was interpreted using the Low, Moderate, and High categories. The basis of the categorization interval needs to be explicitly determined based on the range of the Likert scale used. If the category used is a proposed category, the interval needs to be explained in a method so that the process of interpreting the results can be carried out transparently and can be replicated (Usman et al., 2026) Before use, the validity of the content of the instrument is carried out through expert judgment. The expert assessment is analyzed using – 0.83, so that the instrument is declared an Aiken's V index to measure the suitability and relevance of each item to the indicator being studied (Said et al., 2026). The Aiken's V value obtained is in the range of 0.80-0.83 and has sufficient content validity to be used in the study (Aiken, 1985).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through filling out questionnaires by 200 parents after obtaining explanations of the research objectives, filling procedures, data confidentiality, and voluntariness of participation. The collected data were examined, coded, tabulated, and analyzed descriptively. Nutrition knowledge analysis was carried out through frequency, percentage of correct answers, total scores, and knowledge categories. Feeding practice analysis was carried out through average scores on each indicator and overall. The results of the analysis were presented in the form of a table. The focus of the study was to describe the profile of nutrition knowledge and feeding practices.

Ethical Considerations

Respondents' participation is voluntary. Respondents obtain information regarding research objectives, data collection procedures, information confidentiality, and the right to terminate participation. Data is presented in the aggregate and is used only for research purposes.

RESULTS

Nutrition Knowledge Profile

To describe parents' nutrition knowledge regarding the nutritional needs of children aged 5–6 years, four indicators were assessed: general nutrition awareness, dietary habits, nutrient knowledge, and child nutrition. The results of the descriptive analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Nutrition Knowledge Profile of Parents of Children Aged 5–6 Years

<i>Nutrition Knowledge Indicator</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Correct Responses (%)</i>	<i>Profile</i>
General Nutrition Awareness	4	48.13	Low
Dietary Habits	4	50.50	Low
Nutrient Knowledge	5	51.00	Low
Child Nutrition	5	51.00	Low

<i>Nutrition Knowledge Indicator</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Correct Responses (%)</i>	<i>Profile</i>
Overall	18	50.25	Low

Table 1 presents the nutrition knowledge profile of parents of children aged 5–6 years. The overall percentage of correct responses was 50.25%, indicating a low nutrition knowledge profile. At the indicator level, all four domains were also classified as low, with correct responses ranging from 48.13% to 51.00%. General Nutrition Awareness showed the lowest proportion of correct responses (48.13%), whereas Nutrient Knowledge and Child Nutrition showed the highest (51.00%). These findings indicate that parents demonstrated relatively limited knowledge across the assessed aspects of child nutrition, including basic nutritional awareness, dietary habits, nutrient functions, and nutrition needs during childhood. Furthermore, this study examined the feeding practices implemented by parents in meeting the dietary needs of children aged 5–6 years. The feeding practices profile was assessed across six indicators: healthy eating guidance, food monitoring, food variety and balance, parental modeling, nutrition teaching, and child involvement. The descriptive results for each indicator and the overall feeding practices profile are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Feeding Practices Profile of Parents

<i>Feeding Practices Indicator</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Profile</i>
Healthy Eating Guidance	4	2.58	Moderate
Food Monitoring	4	2.63	Moderate
Food Variety and Balance	5	2.60	Moderate
Parental Modeling	4	2.64	Moderate
Nutrition Teaching	4	2.62	Moderate
Child Involvement	4	2.59	Moderate
Overall	25	2.61	Moderate

Table 2 presents the feeding practices profile of parents of children aged 5–6 years. The overall mean score was 2.61, indicating a moderate feeding practices profile. Across the six indicators, the mean scores were relatively consistent, ranging from 2.58 to 2.64. Parental Modeling showed the highest mean score, whereas Healthy Eating Guidance had the lowest. Overall, the findings indicate that parents demonstrated moderate implementation of feeding practices, including providing healthy and varied foods, monitoring children's food intake, modeling healthy eating behaviors, providing nutrition-related guidance, and involving children in food-related activities.

DISCUSSION

Nutrition Knowledge Profile of Parents

The present study found that parents' nutrition knowledge was generally low across all four assessed domains, with an overall correct-response rate of 50.25%. This pattern indicates that limitations in parental nutrition knowledge were not confined to a particular aspect but extended across general nutrition awareness, dietary habits, nutrient knowledge, and child nutrition. The finding is noteworthy because parents constitute an important source of food-related information and decision-making for children during the preschool period.

The relatively low performance across domains may reflect the multidimensional nature of nutrition knowledge required for everyday child-feeding decisions. Parents need to understand not only which foods are considered healthy, but also meal regularity, dietary variety, nutrient functions, age-appropriate nutritional requirements, and the need to limit less nutritious foods {Citation}. Thus, possessing fragmented knowledge about individual foods may not necessarily indicate adequate understanding of child nutrition as an integrated concept (Carroll et al., 2022). This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence showing that parental nutrition knowledge and dietary practices remain areas requiring improvement. In a large cross-sectional study of 1,746 parents in China, nutrition knowledge and dietary practices were both identified as areas requiring strengthening, while the relationship between knowledge and dietary practices was relatively weak (Carroll et al., 2022).

The present finding is also consistent with recent research emphasizing that parental feeding behavior involves multiple dimensions rather than a single feeding strategy. Studies among parents of preschool children have documented diverse feeding practices, including food provision, monitoring, modeling, and other approaches to managing children's eating (Loth et al., 2023a). In addition, longitudinal evidence from the ToyBox Study indicates that specific food-parenting practices, particularly the availability of fruits and vegetables at home, are associated with preschool children's dietary intake (Flores-Barrantes et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of examining parental nutrition knowledge and feeding practices as multidimensional profiles within the early childhood context.

The findings contribute to the understanding of parental nutrition as a multidimensional profile encompassing knowledge domains that range from basic nutritional awareness to knowledge specifically related to children's nutritional needs. This perspective is important because parental nutrition should not be reduced to knowledge of healthy foods alone. Recent research on preschool nutrition interventions similarly emphasizes the importance of addressing parental resources and knowledge alongside the home food environment when seeking to improve young children's dietary behaviors (Chan et al., 2023).

From an educational perspective, the findings suggest the need for nutrition education programs that provide parents with practical and developmentally appropriate information. Such programs should address not only nutritional concepts but also their application in everyday feeding situations, including food selection, dietary variety, meal routines, and children's involvement in food-related activities. Evidence from a 2024 Indonesian randomized controlled trial further demonstrates that structured nutrition education can improve mothers' nutrition knowledge, self-efficacy, and feeding practices (Mardani et al., 2024).

Profile of Parent Feeding Practices

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that the overall feeding practices of parents of children aged 5–6 years were classified as moderate, with a mean score of 2.61. All six assessed indicators were also classified as moderate, with mean scores ranging from 2.58 to 2.64. Parental Modeling showed the highest mean score (2.64), followed by Food Monitoring (2.63) and Nutrition Teaching (2.62). Meanwhile, Healthy Eating Guidance showed the lowest mean score (2.58). This pattern suggests that parents reported implementing several positive feeding practices, although these practices had not yet reached a consistently high level across all assessed domains.

The moderate profile may indicate that parents have adopted some appropriate feeding behaviors but may apply them inconsistently in daily family routines. Feeding practices involve more than providing food; they also include guiding children's food choices, monitoring food intake, providing variety, modeling eating behavior, explaining nutrition, and involving children in food-related activities (Ayre et al., 2024). These practices require repeated interaction, parental time, nutritional understanding, and a supportive home food environment. Therefore, moderate scores across all domains may reflect the practical challenges parents face in translating nutrition-related intentions into consistent behaviors.

This finding is consistent with the view that parental feeding practices are multidimensional and may occur simultaneously during mealtimes. Loth et al. (2023), through observations of parent-child meals, found that parents of preschool children used a broad range of feeding strategies within a single eating occasion. Their findings suggest that parents rarely rely on only one feeding approach; instead, they combine commands, encouragement, monitoring, praise, and other strategies depending on the mealtime situation (Loth et al., 2023b). Similarly, Rahmaty et al. (2022) identified heterogeneous patterns of caregiver feeding practices among parents of preschool children. Their study demonstrated that parents could simultaneously exhibit controlling practices, regulating practices, and more balanced feeding practices. This supports the interpretation that feeding practices should be understood as a profile of several behaviors rather than as a single uniform parenting style.

The moderate results in the present study also need to be interpreted in relation to the specific feeding dimensions assessed. For example, the relatively higher score for Parental Modeling suggests that parents may be more likely to demonstrate healthy eating behaviors themselves than to provide systematic nutrition explanations or structured guidance. This interpretation is relevant to recent research showing that parental eating behavior and attitudes toward feeding are associated with children's feeding-related difficulties. However, such evidence should be interpreted cautiously because the present study describes feeding practices and does not examine causal relationships (Tengilimoglu-Metin & Kabasakal-Cetin, 2024).

The findings support a multidimensional understanding of parental feeding practices in early childhood. The profile is not limited to food provision but includes behavioral modeling, monitoring, guidance, nutrition teaching, food variety, and child involvement. The relatively narrow range of mean scores across the six indicators indicates that these practices were generally implemented at a similar level. Conceptually, this suggests that parental feeding practices may be understood as a set of interconnected everyday behaviors that jointly shape the food environment experienced by preschool children. Nevertheless, because the present study uses a descriptive design, the findings do not establish the structure of a latent construct or demonstrate relationships among the indicators.

The moderate feeding practices profile indicates the need for practical nutrition education that helps parents strengthen the consistency of their daily feeding behaviors. Parent education should include strategies for guiding healthy food choices, monitoring children's food intake without excessive control, providing varied and balanced meals, modeling healthy eating, explaining basic nutrition in child-friendly language, and involving children in food selection and simple food preparation. These activities may be integrated into parent meetings, school-based nutrition programs, and collaboration between early childhood education institutions and health

professionals. The emphasis should be placed on practical application in the home rather than on nutritional information alone.

Synthesis of Nutritional Knowledge Profiles and Feeding Practices

The results showed that there was a difference between the nutritional knowledge profile and the feeding practices of parents. This pattern shows that the limitations of nutritional knowledge do not always go hand in hand with the low level of feeding practices. The difference can be understood because feeding practices are influenced not only by knowledge, but also by family habits, parental experiences, food availability, economic conditions, parenting time, children's preferences, and eating norms that develop in the family environment (Abate et al., 2025). Parents may have implemented some feeding practices based on daily experience despite not having an adequate understanding of nutrition. Conversely, parents who have nutritional knowledge are not necessarily able to apply them consistently in daily eating situations.

These findings reinforce the view that nutritional knowledge and feeding practices are two components that are conceptually interrelated, but cannot be equated. Nutrition knowledge describes the cognitive aspects of a child's food, nutrients, and nutritional needs, while feeding practices describe the actions of parents when providing, directing, monitoring, and accompanying children to meals (Chen et al., 2024). Therefore, both are more appropriately positioned as two-dimensional in the nutritional profile of the elderly, rather than as a single construct.

In the context of previous research, parental feeding practices are also understood as multidimensional behaviors that include monitoring, direction, modeling, food regulation, and child involvement. Therefore, both are more appropriately positioned as two-dimensional in the nutritional profile of the elderly, rather than as a single construct et al. (Loth et al., 2023b) shows that parents of preschoolers use a variety of feeding strategies in a single feeding situation. Meanwhile, Rahmaty et al. (2022) suggests that caregiver feeding practices can form diverse patterns. The findings support the findings of this study that feeding practices need to be analyzed through several indicators, not just based on parents' nutritional knowledge levels.

Theoretically, this study contributes by placing the Parental Nutrition Profile as a descriptive profile consisting of two main components, namely the Nutrition Knowledge Profile and the Feeding Practices Profile. The separation of these two components is important because the results of the study show that the level of knowledge and practice are not in the same category. Thus, the assessment of the nutritional condition of parents will be incomplete if it only uses knowledge indicators or only measures feeding behavior.

The practical implication of these findings is that nutrition education programs for parents need to be designed in an integrated manner. It is not enough for the program to increase knowledge about nutrition, healthy food, and children's nutritional needs, but it is also necessary to train parents to apply this knowledge in daily practice. Materials can include simple menu planning, provision of diverse meals, monitoring intake, exemplifying eating behaviors, positive communication during meals, and involvement of children in choosing and preparing meals. Such an integrated approach is expected to narrow the gap between what parents know and what is done in parenting.

CONCLUSION

This study describes the nutritional knowledge profile and feeding practices of parents of children aged 5–6 years. The results of the study show that parental nutrition knowledge is in the low category, with an overall correct answer percentage of 50.25%. The four indicators including General Nutrition Awareness, Dietary Habits, Nutrient Knowledge, and Child Nutrition are also in the low category. These findings show that the limitations of parental knowledge occur in various aspects of nutrition, not just in one specific domain. Parental feeding practices are in the medium category, with an overall average value of 2.61. All indicators of feeding practices, namely Healthy Eating Guidance, Food Monitoring, Food Variety and Balance, Parental Modeling, Nutrition Teaching, and Child Involvement, are in the medium category. These results show that parents have implemented a number of positive feeding practices, but their implementation is not optimal and has not been consistent in all aspects. This study shows that the nutritional knowledge profile and feeding practices of parents have different characteristics. Low nutritional knowledge does not automatically indicate that all feeding practices are at a low level. Therefore, the nutritional profile of parents needs to be understood through two different components, namely the knowledge aspect and the practice aspect. This approach provides a more comprehensive picture of parental readiness to support the fulfillment of early childhood nutritional needs. This research has implications for the development of family-based nutrition education programs and early childhood education. The program developed needs to integrate improving nutrition knowledge with strengthening practical skills, such as providing diverse and balanced food, providing examples of healthy eating behaviors, monitoring food intake, giving positive directions, and involving children in food activities. Collaboration between parents, early childhood education teachers, and health workers is needed to support the implementation of more consistent feeding practices in the family environment. Further research is recommended using longitudinal or interventional designs, involving more diverse regions and characteristics of respondents, and combining questionnaires with mealtime observations or measurements of children's food intake.

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