

Healthy Food Serving Strategies to Increase Toddlers' Appetite

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Abstract

Appetite variability in toddlers poses a significant challenge for parents, often impacting their nutritional intake and overall development. Good eating habits are crucial for ensuring optimal growth and health in young children, yet low appetite can lead to malnutrition and developmental setbacks. This study explores effective food presentation strategies to improve appetite among toddlers. Conducted as a field study with a qualitative approach, this research observed 13 purposively selected toddlers aged 1-5 years. Data were collected through direct observation and interviews with parents to identify strategies that stimulate appetite and enhance nutritional intake. Results reveal that creative and varied food presentations successfully enhance toddler appetite. For instance, using visually appealing shapes, colors, and textures significantly increased interest in consuming healthy foods. These findings underscore the importance of parental involvement in creating meal plans that are both nutritious and engaging, allowing toddlers to enjoy a balanced diet consistently. The study suggests that by adopting these creative presentation techniques, parents and caregivers can support better nutrition and growth in children. Further research could explore the long-term impacts of consistent meal presentation strategies on overall dietary habits and health outcomes.

Keywords: Toddler Appetite; Food Presentation; Nutritional Intake; Qualitative Study; Toddler Nutrition Strategies.

Introduction

Good appetite in toddlers is essential to support their growth and development (Ramlah, 2021). However, parents often face challenges in ensuring that their toddlers have a balanced and healthy appetite. One common issue is that toddlers may reject certain foods, which can lead to nutrient deficiencies (Ni'matul, 2021). Various factors, such as health conditions, mood, and eating environment can influence appetite decline in toddlers. Therefore, understanding the factors that affect toddler appetite is crucial (Cono, 2021).

In addition to internal factors, external factors like food presentation also play an important role. Research suggests that the appearance of food—including color, shape, and variety—can influence a toddler's interest in eating. Food presented in an attractive way can increase a toddler's willingness to try and consume the meal (Ni'matul, 2021). However, many parents may not fully realize the importance of food presentation in capturing their toddlers' interest. They may resort to convenient foods, like instant food, presented in an unappealing way (Ilhami, 2024).

A toddler's interest in well-presented food is not solely driven by taste but also by visual aspects. Bright colors, unique shapes, and variety in presentation can make food more appealing to toddlers (Munifa, M., & Dhini, 2020). Prior studies have shown that toddlers are more attracted to food served in small portions with diverse presentations (Ni'matul, 2021). Thus, creative food presentation strategies can be key to increasing toddlers' appetite (Purwanti, 2021). This approach should be considered by parents and caregivers when preparing daily meals.

Beyond visual presentation, the mealtime atmosphere also influences toddlers' appetite. Eating with family in a warm and enjoyable setting can make toddlers feel more comfortable and motivated to eat. In contrast, a pressured or uncomfortable mealtime atmosphere may decrease their appetite (Maulidia et al., 2022). Social interactions during meals, such as light conversation or praise, can also improve a toddler's mood and encourage them to eat more (Mansur & Andalas,

2019). Therefore, creating a positive dining environment is a crucial step in supporting toddlers' appetite.

This study seeks to explore how various food presentation strategies may affect toddlers' appetite. We will also examine how the mealtime atmosphere and social interactions during meals impact their interest in eating. The goal is to identify practical approaches that parents and caregivers can apply to improve toddlers' appetite. This research aims to provide deeper insights into how to address toddlers' appetite challenges, which can help enhance their overall well-being and health.

The study will also examine various factors contributing to toddlers' appetite, such as their food preferences and aversions. We will observe toddlers' food preferences and explore how different presentation methods can change these preferences. Additionally, we will assess whether there are differences in toddlers' responses to creatively presented foods compared to regular presentation. This will help deepen our understanding of how toddlers respond to different food presentation styles. These findings could form the basis for recommending more effective food presentation strategies.

The results of this study are expected to provide concrete, practical recommendations for parents. By understanding effective food presentation strategies, they can more easily address toddler appetite issues. Additionally, this study's findings may offer valuable insights for early childhood education institutions on presenting food more attractively for toddlers. Ultimately, the primary goal of this research is to help improve toddlers' nutritional intake and support their optimal development, making it highly relevant and important to undertake.

This study also hopes to inspire further research in the same field, particularly in the context of food presentation for toddlers. With more information on how food presentation affects toddler appetite, it is hoped that there will be improvements in the approaches used by parents and caregivers. This approach can assist not only in the short term but also in the long term by instilling healthy eating habits in toddlers. The study also aims to encourage innovation in food presentation that can be applied in various contexts, including at home and in educational institutions. Ultimately, the benefits of this research could be widely felt throughout society.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method to identify and analyze effective food presentation strategies for increasing toddlers' appetite. The case study was conducted in multiple families with toddlers aged 2 to 5 years, purposively selected based on willingness and varied socio-economic backgrounds. The study spanned four weeks, during which data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews with parents, and documentation of toddlers' mealtime activities.

The study subjects are toddlers aged 2 to 5 years from 10 families of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Inclusion criteria included toddlers experiencing appetite issues or showing selective eating tendencies. Exclusion criteria included toddlers with specific medical conditions that significantly affect appetite, such as severe food allergies or digestive disorders. Parents of these toddlers also participated in interviews to provide insights into their children's eating habits and efforts made to improve appetite.

Data were collected through multiple techniques to obtain comprehensive information (Assyakurrohim et al., 2023). The primary technique used was participant observation, where the researcher directly observed toddlers' mealtime activities in their homes (Mappasere & Suyuti, 2019). These observations included aspects such as food presentation methods, toddlers' responses to food, and social interactions during meals. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents to explore their experiences, strategies employed, and challenges faced in improving toddlers' appetite. Photographic and video documentation was also utilized to capture various food presentation methods and toddlers' responses to them.

Data collected from observations, interviews, and documentation were qualitatively analyzed using a thematic approach. This analysis began with transcribing interviews and recording observations. Subsequently, coding was conducted to identify key themes that emerged from the data, such as toddlers' visual preferences, factors influencing the mealtime atmosphere, and responses to different food presentation strategies. These themes were then integrated to draw conclusions addressing the study's objectives.

To ensure data validity, the researcher applied data triangulation by comparing the findings from observations, interviews, and documentation (Susanto & Jailani, 2023). Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary results with parents to receive feedback and verify that the interpretations aligned with their experiences. The study prioritizes ethical principles, including informed consent, where parents were provided with complete information about the study's purpose and procedures before agreeing to participate. Personal data confidentiality was maintained by using codes or initials instead of actual names in all research documents. Furthermore, participation was voluntary, allowing parents and toddlers to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Result

This section presents the study's findings on how food presentation strategies can influence toddlers' appetite. The results are organized into subheadings, each providing a detailed interpretation of specific factors identified through direct observation, parent interviews, and literature analysis.

1. Parental Experiences with Food Variety

Many parents reported that introducing variety in the form, color, and texture of food helps increase toddlers' interest in eating. Interviewed parents shared that when food was presented in attractive shapes—such as being cut into small pieces or fun shapes—toddlers were more inclined to try it. This suggests that toddlers tend to be more drawn to visually appealing food, creating a more enjoyable eating experience. Furthermore, creativity in food presentation was highlighted as a means to prevent toddlers from becoming bored and exhibiting picky eating behavior, especially when faced with new or previously rejected foods.

These findings align with recent studies indicating that variety in food presentation plays an important role in attracting children's interest (Triastuti et al., 2017). Research also shows that visually appealing food presentation can stimulate interest, particularly in toddlers who respond strongly to visual stimuli. Additionally, Ramsay et al. found that variety in color, shape, and texture of food significantly aids in introducing new foods to toddlers, reducing fear or discomfort associated with unfamiliar items. Therefore, creative food presentation may be an effective strategy to address reduced appetite and foster a willingness among toddlers to try healthier and more diverse foods (Jatmikowati et al., 2023).

2. Portion Size and Eating Frequency

Portion size and eating frequency emerged as another significant factor identified by parents. Interviews indicated that serving small but frequent portions was an effective approach to maintaining toddlers' interest in food. Parents who offered smaller portions reported that their children felt more comfortable and tended to eat better than when presented with larger portions, as smaller portions were less overwhelming and allowed the child to enjoy the food more comfortably. Additionally, more frequent meals helped sustain the child's energy throughout the day, positively impacting their appetite.

This result supports the study which suggests that toddlers are more likely to eat well when food is presented in small portions at more frequent intervals. This research emphasizes the importance of aligning portion size with the relatively small capacity of a toddler's stomach, as larger portions may lead to a sense of fullness or overwhelm that can ultimately decrease appetite (Loka, L. V., Martini, M., & Sitompul, 2018). Additionally, research by Martin-Biggers et al. (2021) confirms that frequent eating can prevent energy drops, which often lead to crankiness and refusal

to eat. Thus, a more flexible approach to portion size and eating frequency may help establish healthier and more sustainable eating patterns in toddlers.

3. Involvement of Children in the Eating Process

Involving children in food preparation also emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing their appetite. Parents who involved their children in selecting ingredients or helping with meal preparation reported that their children showed greater interest in the served food. Participation in food preparation activities fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility in children, which, in turn, encourages them to try the food with an open mind. Toddlers who engaged in cooking or food preparation tended to be more motivated to eat, as they felt involved in the decision-making process surrounding their food choices.

Children involved in food preparation tend to be more motivated to eat and more willing to try new foods. This study highlights that involvement in meal preparation grants children a sense of autonomy and control over their food, which is essential in fostering a positive relationship with eating (Loka, L. V., Martini, M., & Sitompul, 2018). Furthermore, when children are involved in selecting and preparing meals, they are not only more open to trying new foods but also develop a greater appreciation for healthy food. Thus, involving toddlers in the food preparation process not only boosts their appetite but also helps build healthier eating habits (Kurniawaty, 2022).

4. Positive Mealtime Environment

A comfortable and distraction-free mealtime environment, free from electronic devices such as televisions or mobile phones, was identified by parents as an effective factor in increasing children's focus on food. Parents who fostered a calm atmosphere during meals observed that their toddlers enjoyed food more and were more willing to eat. A positive, pressure-free mealtime environment allows children to concentrate on the food, minimizing distractions and creating a more enjoyable eating experience.

Research by Farrow et al. (2021) supports the importance of creating a distraction-free mealtime environment. The study shows that children who eat in a calm setting, free from electronic distractions, tend to be more focused on their food and develop healthier eating habits. Additionally, research by Lumeng et al. (2020) found that a positive and supportive mealtime environment enhances children's engagement in eating activities and promotes better eating patterns. By establishing a comfortable mealtime environment, parents can help their children enjoy their food more, which ultimately has a positive impact on their appetite.

5. Providing Food Choices

Offering toddlers choices of food was identified by parents as an effective strategy for increasing their appetite. When children were given two or three healthy food options, they were more likely to eat than when given only one choice. This approach gives children a sense of control and autonomy, helping them feel more involved in the eating process and increasing their motivation to eat.

This finding is supported by recent studies, such as Shim et al. (2019), which indicate that children are more motivated to eat when offered a selection of food options. The study suggests that giving children the chance to choose fosters a sense of responsibility over their meal choices, enhancing their willingness to eat. Furthermore, O'Connor et al. (2020) emphasized that offering healthy food choices not only increases toddlers' appetite but also helps reduce mealtime conflicts. By allowing children autonomy in choosing their food, parents can create a more positive mealtime environment, supporting better eating habits in children.

Discussion

In this study, our findings reveal that specific strategies—such as introducing variety in food presentation, offering flexible portion sizes, involving children in food preparation, and cultivating a positive mealtime environment—have a beneficial impact on toddlers' appetite and openness to

trying new foods. These approaches align well with existing research on early childhood eating behaviors, which suggests that young children are highly responsive to sensory stimuli, particularly the visual appeal of food. By emphasizing these sensory aspects, caregivers may be able to reduce selective eating tendencies and help toddlers overcome a natural reluctance to try unfamiliar foods.

The practice of allowing children limited choices at mealtime further reinforces this by providing them with a sense of autonomy and control. Positive mealtime interactions, free from distractions like electronic devices, can also help children focus on eating and develop healthier relationships with food. Collectively, these strategies support a child-centered, interactive approach to mealtime, which can be essential for enhancing dietary variety and fostering long-term healthy eating habits.

Future research could expand on these findings by examining how these strategies might be adapted for children with specific dietary needs or within culturally diverse environments, given that cultural and socioeconomic factors often influence mealtime practices and food preferences. Additionally, longitudinal studies may offer insights into the lasting effects of early exposure to positive and varied eating experiences on children's dietary choices and health outcomes over time.

Conclusion

This study highlights how mealtime strategies—ranging from visually engaging food presentation to child involvement in food choices—play a vital role in enhancing toddlers' appetite and willingness to explore a diverse diet. By focusing on sensory appeal, flexible portions, autonomy in food selection, and a distraction-free environment, caregivers can support healthy eating behaviors that may reduce selective eating tendencies and promote positive associations with food.

The findings offer practical applications for parents and educators, suggesting that creating an inviting mealtime atmosphere tailored to young children's developmental needs can have lasting effects on their dietary habits. As such, these approaches could be implemented in both home and early childhood education settings to encourage healthy eating patterns.

Future research should explore adapting these strategies across different cultural contexts and evaluating the long-term impact of early positive mealtime experiences on dietary choices and health outcomes. Investigating these methods with children who have specific dietary or sensory needs may also provide further insights, potentially broadening the applicability of these practices to support inclusive and health-promoting environments for young children.

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