

Implementation Of Vegetable Eating Motivation Play Therapy To Improve Vegetable Eating Behavior In Preschool Children

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Abstract:

Vegetable Eating Motivation (VEM) is a play therapy program based on vegetable cards or picture books aimed at increasing preschool children's motivation and interest in consuming vegetables. Vegetable consumption among children in Indonesia is still relatively low, especially between the ages of 4 and 6, potentially impacting their nutritional status, growth, and development. This community service activity aims to improve vegetable-eating behavior in preschool children through the application of VEM play therapy. The methods used included lectures, discussions, and demonstrations, conducted with children at Hijriyah II Kindergarten in Palembang City. The intervention included nutrition education, vegetable coloring activities, interactive discussions, and a guessing game. Observations showed an increase in children's motivation and willingness to consume vegetables. Before the intervention, most children rejected vegetables due to taste and appearance. After the intervention, children became more familiar with various types of vegetables and showed interest in trying them.

Keywords: preschool children, play therapy, vegetable eating motivation.

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Introduction

The preschool period is a crucial developmental phase that determines a child's future habits and behaviors, including their eating patterns. However, the phenomenon of picky eating, or the tendency for children to refuse certain foods, such as vegetables, is a major challenge, especially in Indonesia. At this stage, children's growth and development are actively taking place. One important factor supporting this development is a healthy diet with balanced nutrition, as it can impact a child's future quality of life. Unfortunately, children at this age often experience health problems, particularly those related to nutrition, which are generally caused by poor eating habits (Zulfajri, 2021). In this community service, the behavior of fussy eating is categorized as picky eating. This term refers to a condition where a child only wants to consume certain types of food, in small amounts, takes a long time to eat, refuses to try new foods, and exhibits a picky attitude towards food, even foods they actually like (Naisa et al., 2024).

Children with this behavior also tend to be less interested in food in general. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Health (2022) shows that only 8.5% of preschool-aged children meet the recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of engaging and enjoyable nutrition education for children. At preschool age, child development focuses on improving fine motor skills and precision. Activities such as painting, drawing, crafts, and cutting can help children learn to control their emotions and improve hand-eye coordination. Conversely, the use of sophisticated gadgets such as touchscreens can actually hinder optimal fine motor development (Mustakim et al., 2020).

Low vegetable consumption in children is often due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the importance of eating vegetables. Ineffective early nutrition education contributes to a weak understanding of healthy and balanced eating patterns in adulthood, ultimately leading to inappropriate eating behaviors. This condition can negatively impact a child's growth and development, including increasing the risk of malnutrition due to inadequate food intake to meet daily nutritional needs (Sartika et al., 2022). Many mothers face challenges in getting their children into the habit of eating vegetables. However, insufficient vegetable intake can lead to deficiencies in essential nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fiber, potentially disrupting the body's acid-base balance and triggering various health problems (Asqia et al., 2024). Children's eating habits are inseparable from the role of parents, especially mothers, in providing food. If mothers provide children with a balanced diet and provide it consistently every day, it will indirectly shape good eating habits in children. Eating habits are inseparable from the mother's understanding and behavior (Al & Tambak, 2021).

Play is a fun way for children to learn new things. Through play, children can maximize their developmental development. Furthermore, play serves as an effective therapy for children experiencing developmental challenges, as well as a means to explore and develop their potential (Khatulistisa et al., 2022). Play provides opportunities for children to explore, express themselves, create, and learn in a fun environment. Through this process, children will more easily understand themselves, interact with others, and learn about their surroundings. This is why many parents choose to send their children to kindergarten (Rosiah & Mutaqien, 2022).

Vegetables contain vitamins, minerals, and fiber, which are essential for children's growth and development. Inadequate vegetable consumption puts children at risk of metabolic disorders, obesity, and even chronic diseases in adulthood. Previous studies by (Harlistyarintica 2020) and (Israeli et al., 2020) suggest that the primary cause of low vegetable consumption in children is the unappealing taste, color, and texture of vegetables. Several school-based interventions have been implemented, but the approaches are rigid and not adapted to the world of children's play. Despite their important role, vegetables are often unpopular with children. Vegetables function as regulators in the body because they contain various vitamins and minerals, have a high water content, and are a source of fiber that helps maintain acid-base balance and supports optimal body function (BUDIARTI et al., 2023).

Method

This community service activity was conducted at Hijriyah II Kindergarten in Palembang City, targeting preschool-aged children. The methods used included lectures, discussions, and demonstrations, packaged as Vegetable Eating Motivation (VEM) play therapy. VEM play therapy was designed to be educational and fun through various activities, including education on the benefits of vegetables, coloring pictures of vegetables, playing cards and picture books about vegetables, interactive discussions, and providing vegetable-based foods tailored to children's preferences.

Data collection was conducted using observation sheets for children's eating behavior, child knowledge sheets, and documentation during the activity. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive qualitative methods by comparing observations before and after the intervention. This approach was used to assess changes in eating behavior and children's responses to the nutrition education provided through play. The implementation of VEM play therapy is based on theories of children's eating behavior and play-based learning, which emphasizes direct experience and active involvement of children in the learning process.

Results and discussions

The results of the community service program showed changes in vegetable-eating behavior in preschool-aged children after receiving Vegetable Eating Motivation (VEM) play therapy. In the initial

phase of the program, most children showed hesitation and tended to refuse to eat vegetables due to taste and appearance. However, as the intervention progressed, children began to show interest in activities related to vegetables, such as coloring pictures and recognizing the shapes and names of vegetables through flashcards and picture books.

Behavioral changes were seen gradually. On the third and fourth days, children began to actively ask questions, name vegetables, and show enthusiasm while participating in games. The peak of these changes occurred on the fifth and sixth days, when most children began to be more willing to try and no longer reject the vegetable-based foods provided. These results indicate that a nutrition education approach packaged through play can increase children's motivation and willingness to consume vegetables.

These findings align with previous research that suggests that visual educational media and interactive activities can increase children's interest in vegetable consumption. VEM play therapy provides multisensory stimulation through sight, touch, and direct experience, making it easier for children to accept and understand the benefits of vegetables. Furthermore, the activities, conducted in a fun, non-coercive manner, help foster positive experiences with healthy food.



Figure 1. Mewarnai dan Pengenalan sayuran



Figure 2. Pengenalan sayuran dan menebak sayuran

Conclusion

Based on the results of the community service program, it can be concluded that the application of Vegetable Eating Motivation (VEM) play therapy is effective in improving vegetable eating behavior in preschool-aged children. This educational, interactive, and fun approach can increase children's motivation to learn about, try, and consume vegetables. VEM play therapy can be used as an applicable nutrition education method in schools and at home. It is hoped that future community service programs can develop this intervention by including parental knowledge measurement as a supporting variable to obtain more comprehensive results.

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