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The Importance of Healthy Eating Habits for Physical Development Among Preschool Children

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Abstract: This paper examines The Importance of Healthy Eating Habits for Physical Development Among Preschool Children. The researcher interviewed four kindergarten teachers around Shah Alam and Klang, Selangor. The researcher used a semi-structured interview method as a research instrument for the study. Some questions were used while others were adapted based on specific circumstances. "Physical Development" refers to the changes in a person body and its various systems over time. This includes growth, motor skills, coordination, and the development of physical abilities. It encompasses aspects like muscle and bone development, motor control, and sensory perception, all of which contribute to an individual overall physical well-being. It includes all of the physical that can help in the growth of children. Stimulation and proper nutrition are integral to physical development. Essential nutrients like protein, vitamins, and minerals support muscle growth, bone density, and overall health. A well-balanced diet aids in energy levels and helps the body recover after physical activities, contributing to optimal physical development. Therefore, children should be encouraged to run, climb, and spin to activate their senses. Children can learn and acquire abilities that are important for interaction social, growth and focus through play.

Keywords: Healthy Eating, Habits, Physical Development, Preschool

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a period of rapid growth and development, and good nutrition is critical to facilitating this period because healthy eating habits and behaviours acquired during this period lay the foundation for immediate and future health. Hence, the formation of these healthy eating habits and behaviours, however, is highly demonstrated to be influenced by the settings in which they live and play (Mahmood et al., 2022). For instance, early establishment of healthy eating environments helps start children on the path to optimal health and development, especially in early childhood education settings where children might spend significant amounts of time.

In this study on early childhood, a balanced diet is a habit of choosing food that includes various types of food groups in appropriate amounts for the needs of various important functions of the body. However, balanced eating habits in Malaysia are guided by the Malaysian Food Pyramid through a balanced combination of nutrition (KKM, 2020). For instance, healthy eating habits are important for young children development, such as quick brain growth through vitamins and nutrients vital influence; if adequate levels are available, the brain can develop to its maximum capacity for children.

The global agenda is focused on nutrition, health, and nutrition knowledge. A healthy body and mind result from an appropriate diet beginning in childhood. As a result, appropriate nutritional choices are critical for any human being growth and motor development beginning with conception. Children in preschool require proper balanced nutrition and healthy eating habits to maintain a healthy mind. Behera et al. (2019) stated that these three variables will suffice to accomplish social and economic growth; only a combination will allow progress towards a world free of poverty and hunger. For instance, nutrition education is an important aspect of improving the nutrition Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KPA) of schoolchildren, families, and society at large (Florence et al., 2020). Thus, healthy eating habits education is a critical first step in educating their nutrition is not only a source of nutrition knowledge but there are also

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other access points such as school environment, school meals, health and nutrition with motor development and vice versa.

In Malaysia, their still problems with children healthy eating habits, and physical health, on their physically particularly in rural areas and urban areas their a lack of educators' readiness for credibility view (Hudin et al., 2019). For instance, educators need well-established knowledge of the crucial role of eating habits in promoting physical development, a significant global challenge that persists. Many individuals, particularly in underprivileged communities, lack access to adequate and diverse diets, leading to a deficiency in essential nutrients necessary for healthy growth. This pervasive issue of inadequate healthy eating poses a substantial obstacle to achieving optimal physical development and can result in a range of adverse consequences, including stunted growth, increased susceptibility to diseases, and impaired cognitive development.

Bergen & Labonté (2020) found that eating disorders might impact their children growth with their motor development such as having a higher risk of being underweight and poor growth over time or vice versa. For instance, being overweight is another matter of balanced nutrition causes for eating disorders include children having difficulty eating early, late introduction of thick food when weaning, pressure the children to eat and being picky from an early age. Hence, healthy eating habits that include poor food variations and possible distortion of nutrient intake, with low iron and zinc intake related to low intake of meat, fruits and vegetables, should be of particular concern in daily intake eating habits for children (Truman & Elliot, 2020). For instance, as a result low-fibre food intake, and low fruit and vegetable intake, are associated with constipation in food pickers. There may be an effect on their developmental difficulties in some children with persistent eating disorders especially on their motor development physically. Based on the background above, the main objective of this study was to assess the healthy eating habits and physical development of preschool children aged 5 years old. Hence, the researcher discovered healthy eating habits and physical development among children could have a significant impact on their age-related.

2. Literature Review

Research by Bagchi et al. (2021) demonstrated that nutrient intake, particularly in essential areas like protein, calcium, and iron, significantly influences the growth and bone density of preschool-aged children. Similarly, it is revealed that dietary patterns in early childhood have a found impact on motor skills and overall physical well-being. These findings corroborate the notion that adequate nutrition, characterized by a balanced diet rich in essential nutrients, is a fundamental cornerstone in shaping physical development during the preschool years (Chouraqui et al., 2019). For instance, they provide further support for the long-term implications of early childhood nutrition, emphasizing the enduring effects on health and well-being in later life. As we delve deeper into empirical literature, it becomes increasingly evident that understanding the interplay between healthy eating habits and physical development in preschool children is essential for ensuring their optimal growth and future health outcomes.

Beyond the direct impact on physical growth and development, they also highlight the interrelated nature of healthy eating habits and cognitive development during the preschool years (Bedrick et al., 2020). For instance, nutrient-rich diets in early childhood are associated with improved cognitive abilities, which can, in turn, influence a child's motivation for physical activities. This connection between healthy eating habits and cognitive development underscores the intricate relationship between dietary choices and the acquisition of skills necessary for physical growth, such as problem-solving, coordination, and language development. Furthermore, the importance of early dietary habits in shaping a child's attitudes and preferences toward food, subsequently impacting their dietary choices and physical activity patterns as they age. As these findings in tandem with the broader empirical literature, it becomes evident that a comprehensive understanding of nutrition influence on physical development in preschool children necessitates a holistic examination of its impact on both physical and cognitive domains.

Moreover, the role of socio-economic factors and environmental influences in shaping the nutritional landscape for preschool children. Access to nutritious food options, parental education, and income levels are significant determinants of dietary quality in early childhood (Suri et al., 2021). These socioeconomic disparities can lead to unequal nutritional opportunities among preschool-aged children, potentially resulting in disparities in physical development outcomes. For instance, points to the impact of food marketing and food environments on dietary choices among young children. Thus, the factors that play a role in shaping nutritional behaviours and, consequently, physical development are crucial influences not only for advancing our knowledge but also for developing targeted interventions aimed at improving healthy eating habits and physical development for all preschool children, regardless of socio-economic background.

In addition, exploring the relationship between healthy eating habits and physical development in preschool children the importance of dietary diversity and its influence on a child overall health. This study highlights that a varied diet not only provides a broader spectrum of essential nutrients but also encourages a child to develop a palate for a wide range of foods, fostering lifelong dietary habits. In parallel, underscores the significance of parental modelling of healthy eating behaviours. Their study indicates that when parents actively engage in nutritious dietary practices, children are more likely to adopt and maintain these behaviours, leading to positive impacts on their physical development. These findings underscore the intricate relationship between the child nutritional environment and early dietary experiences, suggesting that interventions targeting both children and their caregivers can be pivotal in promoting optimally healthy eating habits and physical growth during the preschool years.

3. Methodology

In this study, the researcher selected the qualitative method. As Aspers & Corte (2019) says, the qualitative feature involves a small number of respondents. The topic of this study is also clear this study is exploratory. Researchers need to interview some teachers in kindergarten or preschool to obtain information analyze them and evaluate them. The purpose of the researcher is to know how far the nutrition intake with early childhood education can enhance or have a positive impact on their learning. Using this qualitative research makes it easier to obtain valid and accurate information as the researcher meets the respondents. Even more, so the researcher title is related to nutrition. Researchers can see for themselves the importance of healthy eating habits in physical development during learning.

Research design tends to be a framework for data collection and analysis. As mentioned above, this study is a qualitative mode. So, the research design is in a descriptive form, in the form of verbal or written words about human behaviour that can be observed. The data come from three things which are the Semi-Structured Interview, the result, and written material. (1) Interview: Detailed description of situations, events, interactions, and behaviour observed in the field; (2) The results of the trial: a direct collection of people statements about their experiences, attitudes, confidence, and thoughts on in-depth interview occasions; (3) Written materials: excerpts or entire documents, recordings, and historical cases.

Based on Fig. 1, the researcher provides a research framework to help the researcher see how the study is progressing. began with a problem statement, in which the researcher states the problem encountered for the research topic, then the researcher researches the research topic and gathers information about the research topic for the first phase by reviewing previous research studies. Previous research related to the study objective. As many as 20 articles have been chosen for the researcher to review before beginning the actual study. The researcher also investigates previous studies by connecting relevant theories such as Jean Piaget's, Theory, Albert Bandura theory and Bioecological Theory.

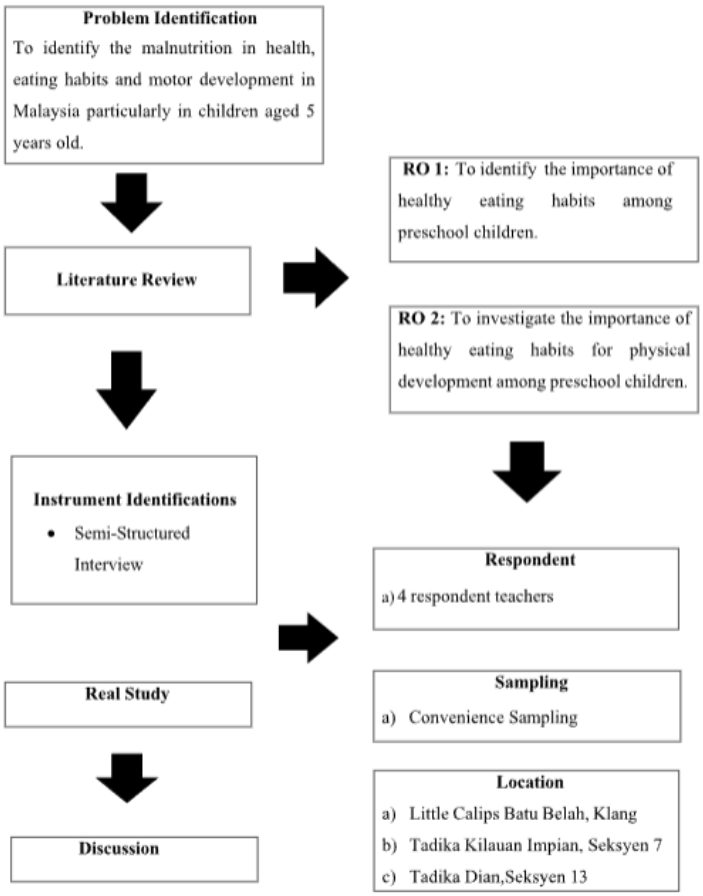


Fig. 1: Research Framework

The population for this study is at Shah Alam, Selangor in Malaysia. In this study, the researcher used 4 preschools and 4 teachers. Population is a larger group that will benefit from the findings. There are two types of population. First, the target population is the Population that researchers want to investigate and form the basis for generalization. Rarely obtained. That is why the target population is said to be the ideal population. According to, this entire population is a target population where the population has the characteristics of the desired respondents in the study. According to them,

an overall selection for this subject should be manageable, obtainable, or accessible population and generalizable and not limited to samples and guaranteed.

This study used Purposive Sampling, which is a group of subjects with certain characteristics only selected as the respondents of the study based on the knowledge and specific purpose of the researcher research. This means that not all studies in their population are selected by the researcher as respondents. Not a random sample and the results of the study cannot be generalized to the entire student population in the school because they do not represent all students in the population (representing the selected study subject). In this study, the researcher chose a structured interview because it's easier, systematic and prepares as well when she goes to the interview.

4. Results

This study uses qualitative research methods that use thematic analysis to collect data. Thematic analysis is a method for examining qualitative data that is frequently applied to a group of texts, such as an interview or transcripts. Thematic analysis is also a process that is used by many qualitative methods; it is not a separate method, but rather something to be used to assist researchers in analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Holloway & Todres, 2003). Transcripts from interviews, excerpts from the news, answers to questionnaires, entries from diaries, videos, photos, or field observations are a few examples of qualitative data that can be gathered.

Thematic analysis can be done in a variety of ways, but the most common technique involves six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Braun and Clarke (2006) invented this method for psychological research. However, thematic analysis is a versatile method that can be applied to a wide range. Moreover, the research can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (King, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another advantage of thematic analysis is that some researchers who are foreign to qualitative methods may find it straightforward to grasp and fairly quick to master because there are few prescriptions and procedures.

4.1 Respondent Demographic

In this study, after undergoing a few interview sessions with preschool teachers to collect the data, the total number of respondents that were collected is 4 people for the real study. Both of the teachers are from Little Caliph Batu Belah, Klang and Tadika Kilauan Impian, Seksyen 13, Tadika Dian, and Seksyen 13 in Shah Alam. Table 1 shows the respondent demographic.

Table 1: Respondent of the Study

Kindergartens	Respondent	Age (Years Old)	Education	Race
Liltle Caliph Tadika Rama- Rama Pintar	LCTRP1	20-24	Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE)	Malay
	LCTRP2	20-24	Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE)	Malay
Tadika Dian	TD1	62-65	M.a. education, Reading U.U.K	Malay
Tadika Kilauan Impian	TKI1	43-51	Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE)	Malay

4.2 Identification of the Importance of Healthy Eating Habits Among Preschool Children

Table 2 shows that virtually all teachers agreed that nutrition with physical development is crucial for children. According to (LCBB1), Healthy eating is very important with the children. In addition, (LCBB2) said that the educator needs proper meals protein, carbohydrates and fat. Then (TTDI1) mentioned that encouraging the 4 portions also can help children maintain their health. Furthermore, (TTKI) has focused on healthy food with the logo "Halal" to make the nutrition clean and beneficial for children.

Table 2: Identification of the Importance Of Healthy Eating Habits Among Preschool Children

Theme	Code	Respondent	Quote
Healthy food	Importance of healthy eating habit	LCTRP1	- Healthy food eating a variety of foods that give them the nutrients they also need to maintain their health, feel good and have energy - Healthy food included food groups and the function of each food group based on the food guide pyramid.
		LCTRP2	- Healthy food gets carbohydrates, protein and fruit proper meals with their early habits - Children eating healthy food can improve their body metabolism

continued

		TTDI1	- Children can eat healthy food by 4 proteins, two portions of the vegetables and the other portion will be carbohydrates and fats - Helps children maintain healthy weight and boost energy levels - Encourage children to eat the carrot will get beautiful eyes
		TTK1	- Healthy food with good nutrition and have a "HALAL" - Children will learn that healthy food is perceived as cleaner and healthier - Children eat healthy food such as honey, dates and raisins - Some children will eat if the teacher shares the story of were buying
Elements	- Procedures and practices - Communication plan	LCTRP1	- Before starting to handle the food, I need to wash hands, used aprons should be clean - The most important thing is to keep fingernails short and clean - Communication plans to parents to decorate food to attract children to eat
		LCTRP2	- Practices daily routine such as the most important is to make sure the food is healthy and clean - The communication plan asks the parents to teach the children at home to tell the story about food healthy
		TDI1	- Procedures apply the typhoid and practice washing before handling food serving and making sure plates and utensils are clean - The communication plan encourages parents to pack drinks such as milk and plain water
		TTK1	Following the procedures hygiene properly with the KKM and the most important is washing hands

Additionally, healthy eating habits with physical development aims have the elements that are appropriate with their practices and procedures to handle the food with proper clean aprons (LCBB1). According to (LCBB2), they also can practice daily routines that can make them clean and healthy also they have a communication plan to encourage the parents to teach the children about healthy food. When (TTDI1 procedures apply all teachers have to take the injection typhoid also the plan is to encourage the parents to bring their drink at home which plain water and milk can't give the children the drink sweet. Also, procedure the hygiene followed the KKM (TTKI1).

4.3 Healthy Eating Habits for Physical Development Among Preschool Children

Based on Table 3, (LCBB1) states that eating habits can be important for children's physical activities when the children eat food that has fibre, calcium and magnesium. For example, they do the body movement during physical time which does some of the activity with circle time. Next, children can use their gross motor skills and their muscles to explore with their whole body. Meanwhile, (LCBB2) stated that they need proper meals such as vegetables, fruits and so on that are related to their eating habits, also they encourage the children to always bring plain water to the class to avoid the children not being in the mood while doing the activity. Furthermore, (TTD1) stated that they have less intake fast food because it might affect their routine meals and also give some meals that attract the children to eat. For example, Bento Meals has some decorations and several foods that might encourage children to eat that food. However, eating habits must provide the children with carrots, broccoli and green vegetables (TTK1) but also need to provide other food to encourage their meals with physical activity for the children.

Table 3: Healthy Eating Habits for Physical Development Among Preschool Children

Theme	Code	Respondent	Quote
Children development	Eating habits	LCTRP1	- Eating habits that are related to their physical activities are the children need to select foods with these nutrients - The serving includes calcium, magnesium, potassium, and fibre - Physical activity improves bodily movement produced by skeletal muscle which requires energy expenditure.
		LCTRP2	- The eating habits in this preschool are needed to give them a proper meal with their nutrition - Nutrition-rich food including fruits and vegetables in this preschool - Eating habits in promoting the water in healthy habits
		TTDI1	- Children eating habits less of intake fast food - Give more rice and soup to attract the children - Given less sugar or chocolate to make sure the children didn't hyper in the class

continued

Theme	Code	Respondent	Quote
		TTK1	- Children eating habits need to include carrots, broccoli and green vegetables - Encourage eating habits with improved physical activity and get a proper meal
Physical activity	Play and circle time	LCTRP1	- Circle time music movement because they like to dance and sing songs together - Free play-playing toys
		LCBB2	- Jogging, walking around the playground and doing some activities the children like - Running around the playground
		TTD1	Do activities such play running, playing games, exercising and playing football
		TKK1	Children like swimming activities, foot chop animals, riding horses and nature walking
Elements	- Food schedules - Program nutrition	LCTRP1	- The schedule is at 10:00 AM for breakfast fried noodles or fried rice - Market day sells the food healthy
		TTD1	- Children breakfast at 9:00 AM provides coco crunch and lunch at 12:PM the meals depend on the schedule on that day - Do activities make “Build Pyramid Food”
		TKK1	- The schedule that prepared the meals is Monday until Wednesday have fried mee and char kuew-tiau - Friday has fried rice also lunch has rice, soup, and curry only 1 time - Evening has provided meals such as porridge and so on - Merdeka Day has to do some cooking “Kuih Gula Melaka” with the colouring of the flag - Also, the program with parents does not use the vegetables

They encourage physical activity. There are a lot of perspectives of teachers at three preschools that can improve their physical development. The teacher (LCBB1) stated that activity can be done in circle time and some do the movement related to their bodily-kinesthetic can make children more active. Also, (LCBB2) do activities like running, jumping and so on that are related to the children’s motor skills and also give children healthier in the classroom. Thus, most of the time providing activities free play (TTD1) every evening such as playing football, games and exercising at the playground can encourage the children to be more active with their gross motor skills to improve their whole body. Then, they stated that (TKK1) during the school holiday they have to do activities swimming and science activities such as foot animals, riding horses and nature walking. This is because it can improve the children’s engagement in various activities and can enhance the children’s social skills and knowledge.

The elements in this component are the food schedule and the programme of healthy eating habits that will be seen in the different preschools they have to provide different routines and programs. Basically, (LCBB1) has each of the schedules on the preschool at 10:00 AM the children have breakfast and then continue with the learning also they encourage the program nutrition which does the Market Day in this program that encourages the children to sell the food with the healthy eating habits that can improve more the children with learning skills and social skills through of the gross motor skills. Next, (TTD1) they have stated the preschool has some breakfast, but it depends on the children bringing the food during the breakfast is 9:00 AM and the programme encourages the parents to do activities with their children which “Build a Pyramid food”. However, the different perspective (TTKI1) is which they prepared the meals with the day which has different food, and the programme is they involve the parents doing the flag using the colour food but in less quantity than the programme also encourages the parents to make breakfast meals which sandwich.

5. Discussion

5.1 Identification of the Importance of Healthy Eating Habits Among Preschool Children

Basically, from the results of the study found by the researcher ensuring optimal healthy eating habits for preschool children is imperative as this developmental stage lays the groundwork for their future health and well-being. The preschool years encompass a period of remarkable growth and cognitive expansion, making it essential to provide a balanced and nutrient-rich diet (Gilmore et al., 2018). Beyond merely sustaining physical development, proper healthy eating habits serve as a cornerstone for a robust immune system. This resilience is pivotal in safeguarding preschoolers against common infections and illnesses, fostering a healthy and thriving environment for their overall growth. Moreover, the impact of healthy eating habits extends to cognitive abilities. The nutrients obtained from a well-rounded diet play a fundamental role in supporting brain function and positively influencing learning capabilities, concentration, and memory

retention. The significance of this cognitive nourishment during the preschool years cannot be overstated, as it sets the stage for future academic success and intellectual prowess.

Beyond the obvious benefits, prioritizing healthy eating habits in early childhood lays the groundwork for lifetime health. Introducing a broad and balanced diet to preschoolers not only reduces the likelihood of immediate health issues but also cultivates healthy eating habits that can last into adolescence and adulthood (Reviani & Riany, 2022). This proactive strategy reduces the likelihood of dietary deficiencies, obesity, and other health disorders, as well as resilient future generations. Prioritizing healthy eating habits throughout the preschool years is thus an investment in these children long-term health, happiness, and prosperity. In the preschool context, for example, healthy eating habits become more than just a matter of subsistence; they become an important component of the learning and development process. These preschoolers are benefiting from introducing a range of healthful foods into their daily routine.

5.2 Healthy Eating Habits for Physical Development Among Children in Preschool

Based on the result the research found that the intertwining relationship between children's eating habits and physical activities is a critical determinant of their overall health and well-being. As studies have shown, a balanced diet plays a crucial role in meeting the energy demands of active children. Proper nutrition, rich in essential nutrients, not only fuels physical activities such as play and sports but also supports optimal cognitive function, contributing to a holistic developmental approach (Ansuya et al., 2023). Moreover, physical activities enhance appetite regulation, and children engaged in regular exercise are more likely to develop a positive relationship with food. This connection between healthy eating and physical activity is foundational in managing weight and preventing childhood obesity. For instance, encouraging hydration and emphasizing the importance of nutrient-dense foods further complement the benefits of a physically active lifestyle. Ultimately, the habits formed during childhood have a lasting impact, shaping lifelong perspectives on health and wellness.

The intricate interplay between children healthy eating habits and physical activities is a factor in determining their holistic well-being. Research consistently emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between a balanced diet and an active lifestyle in the developmental phase of childhood. Optimal healthy eating habits not only serve as the bedrock for sustaining the energy required during physical endeavours but also significantly contribute to cognitive function and overall academic performance (Samuel, 2014). Furthermore, engaging in regular physical activities fosters healthier appetite regulation, instilling in children an intuitive understanding of their body nutritional needs. This connection becomes crucial in the context of weight management, with studies highlighting the role of a nutritious diet in tandem with physical exercise in preventing childhood obesity. For instance, encouraging proper hydration alongside a well-balanced diet supports the physiological demands of active play and contributes to sustained overall health these habits are foundational, influencing long-term perspectives on health, it underscores the importance of fostering a synergistic approach to children eating habits and physical activity.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the knowledge of preschool teachers in Shah Alam and Klang in the preparedness the balanced meals is very high. Healthy eating habits play an important role in inspiring teachers, reducing workload, helping them face the challenges of the teaching profession, promoting their professional work throughout life and improving efficiency in their work. Therefore, teachers should take the opportunity to gain more knowledge and improve their knowledge in establishing the proper meals to provide and provide a teaching and learning environment that is facing young children who need constant patience to see their growth in the long term. The results of this study have shown that in this 21st century, it can improve the child as a whole successful individual and be school-ready for real-life obstacles. There is such a good improvement that can be seen through the roles played by each educator. Still, the educator needs to look for more ways to enhance their role to be more effective in the situation and child. The educator needs to be aware as they are the next trustworthy person for the child after the parents the preschooler is their second home to give the children advice and learning with their knowledge through the healthy eating habits with their physical development. The results of the study can be used as a reference in studying the importance of healthy eating habits with physical development in all areas that have preschools or kindergartens.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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