

Picky Eating Behaviors Among Early Childhood Children at an Early Childhood Development Center in Northeastern Thailand: Perspectives of Parents and Caregivers in the Society 5.0

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Abstract

Background: Picky eating in early childhood is a growing nutritional concern with implications for child growth and development.

Picky eating in early childhood is a significant nutritional concern with potential consequences for children's physical growth, cognitive development, and long-term health outcomes. In the context of Society 5.0—a human-centered society in which advanced technologies (AI, IoT, Big Data, Robotics, etc.), and digital media are deeply integrated into daily life—children's eating behaviors are increasingly shaped by digital environments. Prolonged screen exposure, digital food marketing targeting young children, and reduced quality mealtime interactions in technology-driven households may collectively exacerbate selective eating patterns. Despite growing recognition of these influences, limited qualitative evidence exists regarding how parents and caregivers perceive and respond to picky eating behaviors in this evolving societal context.

Objective: This study aimed to explore picky eating behaviors among children aged 2–5 years at an early childhood development center (ECDC) in Northeastern Thailand, from the perspectives of both parents and caregivers in the context of Society 5.0.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 10 parents (aged ≥18 years) and 10 caregivers (with ≥1 year of experience) from an ECDC. Data were collected through recorded interviews and verbatim transcription. Content analysis was performed through triangulation across multiple data sources to ensure accuracy and validity, and findings were derived through inductive analysis.

Results: Shared perspectives between parents and caregivers regarding picky eating behaviors included children refusing certain foods—such as vegetables—both at home and at ECDC, some children refusing to eat only within the ECDC setting, and some consuming exclusively milk prepared from home. Divergent findings revealed that screen dependency at home was associated with reduced appetite and food refusal, reflecting a characteristic feature of Society 5.0 digital lifestyles. At ECDC, coercive feeding practices by caregivers were reported, while some parents employed preferred snacks as behavioral incentives for ECDC attendance. Unauthorized sweets brought to ECDC were confiscated by caregivers for communal use.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Picky eating behaviors in early childhood are shaped by both inappropriate feeding practices and differing contextual environments, with digital technology use in the Society 5.0 emerging as a contributing factor—particularly through screen-related appetite disruption and digitally influenced food preferences. Integrated, multi-stakeholder strategies that engage parents, caregivers, nutritionists, and policymakers are essential to standardize nutritional care. Leveraging Society 5.0 technologies—such as AI-based nutritional monitoring applications and digital health platforms—may offer promising avenues for early identification and management of picky eating, ultimately improving dietary quality and nutritional outcomes among early childhood children.

Keywords

Picky eating, early childhood, caregivers, parents, nutritional behavior, Society 5.0.