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Research Article

Building Discipline Through Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors: "Shared Lunch Education" for Early Childhood

Andini Hardiningrum[1,*], Jauharotur Rihlah[1], Afib Rulyansah[2], Firdaus[3], Nur Idhofi Aliya[1]
[1] Department of Early Childhood Education Teacher Education, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
[2] Department of Primary Teacher Education, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
[3] Department of Nursing, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of discipline through the habit of healthy living in early childhood by examining the patterns, forms, and indicators that emerge in healthy routines, the impact of healthy living behaviors on children's independence and sense of responsibility, and parental support.

Methodology: This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with observation sheets, interview guidelines, and documentation as instruments. The research subjects were nine children aged 3-4 years. Data were obtained through direct observation, recorded semi-structured interviews, field notes, and photographic documentation. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was strengthened through source and technique triangulation.

Main Findings: The results of the study show that discipline and healthy living behaviors are formed through routine habits, teacher role modeling, consistent school culture, and parental support. Children demonstrate disciplined behavior by willingly following rules, eating independently, and taking responsibility for cleaning up their eating utensils. Healthy living behaviors practiced by children include washing their hands with soap, using clean eating utensils, and brushing their teeth after meals.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study offers new insights into the process of internalizing discipline and healthy lifestyle behaviors in early childhood through school routines, teacher consistency, and parental support at home. These findings emphasize the importance of school culture synergy, teacher role modeling, and family support in forming the foundation for sustainable positive behaviors from an early age.

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Corresponding Author:
Andini Hardiningrum,
Early Childhood Education Teacher Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya, Jl. Raya Jemursari No.57, Surabaya, Jawa Timur 60237 Indonesia
Email: andinihardiningrum@unusa.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of discipline and the habit of clean and healthy living in early childhood is an important foundation for children's social, emotional, and behavioral development, because at this stage children begin to develop self-control, daily habits, and behavior patterns that will affect their future health and character

[1]-[4]. Early childhood is known as the golden age, a decisive phase in the formation of habits and character, because children are highly responsive to environmental stimulation, routines, and repeated practices [1], [5]. At this stage, children learn through direct experience, observation, and social interaction in everyday life [6], [7]. Therefore, character development, including discipline and clean and healthy living habits, is greatly influenced by the process of habituation and children's interaction with an environment that supports social-emotional development and self-regulation [3], [4], [8].

Clean and healthy living behaviors in early childhood, such as healthy eating habits, washing hands with soap, eating in an orderly manner, using clean eating utensils, and maintaining personal hygiene after eating, are basic habits that need to be instilled from an early age through structured, consistent, and continuous practice in early childhood education settings [9]. Schools, as formal educational environments and second homes for children, play an important role in shaping disciplined character and clean and healthy living behaviors through structured, consistent, and contextually appropriate habit-forming activities [10]-[12]. In practice, teachers not only act as educators, but also as role models who set direct examples of disciplined behavior, maintaining cleanliness, and orderliness in daily activities [13]. The development of discipline in young children is greatly influenced by consistency, teacher role modeling, and a supportive learning environment, because routines that are repeated with clear examples can help improve self-regulation, compliance with rules, and disciplined behavior in children [3], [4], [14], [15].

Within the framework of habit formation and role modeling, one form of contextual habit formation that can be implemented in schools is a shared lunch program. Eating together at school is not only about fulfilling children's nutritional needs, but also serves as a means of social learning, self-regulation, independence, responsibility, and internalization of discipline through structured eating rules [16], [17]. Based on initial observations at KB-TK Khadijah Pandegiling Surabaya, it was found that around 90% of children aged 3-4 years showed a relatively consistent level of discipline in practicing clean and healthy habits, such as washing their hands before eating, participating in group lunches, and showing independence in eating and managing their own cutlery. These findings indicate the internalization of disciplined behavior formed through systematic and continuous lunch routines.

Family background, parenting styles, and school culture also reinforce the implementation of the shared lunch program, thereby instilling values of discipline and clean and healthy living in children. The shared lunch program not only fulfills nutritional needs but also provides a context for learning social skills, independence, and discipline through structured meal routines [14]-[16]. Several studies show that the success of instilling discipline in children is greatly influenced by consistent habits, teacher role models, and synergy between schools and parents at home. However, there are still limitations in studies that specifically examine how simple activities such as eating lunch together can be a means of shaping the character and discipline of early childhood, especially in the context of Islamic-based early childhood education institutions.

Based on this background, the main focus of this study is to examine the phenomenon of character building, discipline, and healthy living habits through a consistent lunch program at Khadijah Pandegiling Kindergarten in Surabaya. Previous studies have shown that habit formation, role modeling, and positive reinforcement are effective approaches in character education. However, this study provides a different perspective by placing the lunch routine as an entry point for the internalization of discipline and clean and healthy living behaviors in early childhood. The approach used in this study is a descriptive qualitative approach by observing the discipline of children during lunch activities at school. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the integration of clean and healthy living habits, teacher role modeling, lunch culture, and hand washing before meals in schools, as well as family support as a unified system for shaping the character and discipline of early childhood. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide practical contributions to early childhood education institutions in designing consistent shared lunch programs as effective strategies for character building and discipline.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe in depth the phenomenon of character building through the habit of clean living and healthy eating habits among young children. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the processes, meanings, and experiences of research subjects naturally in the context of school and early childhood education [20].

The research procedure was carried out through the following stages: Planning Stage, Researchers conducted preliminary studies, formulated research focus, determined research subjects, and prepared instruments in the form of observation guidelines, interview guidelines, and documentation sheets. Implementation Stage, The study was conducted at Khadijah Pandegiling Kindergarten in Surabaya by observing healthy lifestyle habits during lunch. Direct observations were made of nine children aged 3–4 years, accompanied by interviews with teachers and parents. Data Analysis Stage, The data was analyzed using Miles and Huberman’s interactive model, which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and

conclusion drawing. Data Validation Stage, Data validity is strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation to improve the credibility and validity of research results.

Data collection techniques were carried out through: Observation, which involves participant observation, meaning that researchers are directly involved in observing children's disciplinary behavior and clean and healthy living habits firsthand. Interviews, were conducted using a semi-structured approach to obtain in-depth information from teachers and parents regarding the process and impact of habituation. Documentation, in the form of photographs of activities and field notes, was used as supporting data to strengthen the validity of the research findings.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively by grouping data based on themes of clean and healthy living habits through shared lunches, character discipline, teacher strategies, and the role of parents. The analyzed data was then presented in the form of narratives, tables, and images to clarify the research findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Building Discipline Through Shared Lunch Education

The results of the study show that the implementation of shared lunch education at KB-TK Khadijah Pandegiling Surabaya is an effective and contextual strategy in shaping the character of early childhood discipline through the habit of clean and healthy living. This activity is designed as a structured daily routine that not only emphasizes nutritional fulfillment but also integrates aspects of cleanliness, orderliness, religious values, and independence in a series of meaningful activities. The integration of clean and healthy lifestyle practices into school activities is a proven strategy for instilling discipline in early childhood through consistent, planned, and repetitive daily routines [1], [21].

Lunch education at school is carried out consistently every day, covering a series of activities before, during, and after meals, so that children gain direct learning experiences in applying contextual behaviors related to discipline and health. Consistency in instilling healthy behaviors from an early age has been positively demonstrated in studies linking clean and healthy lifestyle practices with the development of discipline in young children, showing that instilling clean and healthy behaviors has an effect on children's rules and self-control [2], [8], [22]. In addition, instilling clean and healthy living habits in the school environment provides important support for the formation of positive habits that support children's self-regulation on an ongoing basis [4], [23]. The results of the observation show that consistently practicing hand washing before and after meals increases children’s awareness of the importance of personal hygiene. Children gradually show an increase in discipline, as evidenced by their ability to perform these activities independently without intensive guidance from teachers. Practicing clean and healthy living habits from an early age can foster sustainable healthy habits and support the development of children's discipline through the implementation of structured activities in daily learning [12], [15], [24]. Interestingly, this habit not only appears in the school environment, but also begins to be applied by children at home, which shows the internalization of healthy behavior into everyday life.

The habit of sitting properly, praying before eating, and repeating the rules of eating before the meal begins has been proven to shape children's compliance with shared rules. Children learn to control themselves, wait their turn, and appreciate the process of eating as a regular and valuable activity. Rules in the context of eating together at school provide an important learning space for shaping the discipline and social behavior of young children [16], [18], [25], [26]. Although there were differences in the speed of adaptation among the children, all students showed positive developments in disciplinary behavior during the observation period. Taking food in turns and in appropriate portions contributes to shaping patience, responsibility, and awareness of consequences in children. Children not only learn to wait in line, but also understand that every choice carries responsibility, such as finishing the food they have taken. Discipline during meals is reflected in children's behavior, which is more focused, not talking while eating, and being able to finish their meals in an orderly manner. The structure of eating together helps children develop healthy eating habits and discipline, which is simultaneously reflected in their behavior, which is more focused, respectful of the process, and able to finish their meals in an orderly manner [11], [27]. This pattern supports the formation of disciplined habits as an important part of character education from an early age [26].

The steps after eating, such as clearing the table, disposing of trash in its proper place, and cleaning the dining area, further strengthen children's sense of responsibility and independence. Children show initiative and awareness of environmental hygiene without always having to be directed by teachers. Brushing teeth after eating is an important indicator of the success of developing sustainable healthy habits. Post-meal habits play an important role in building children's personal awareness and responsibility from an early age, with routine-based interventions carried out at school having a more sustainable impact [10], [17].

3.2 The Role of Teachers in Shared Lunch Education

Teachers play a central role in the success of shared lunches as a means of shaping the discipline of young children. The development of discipline in young children is greatly influenced by consistent habits, the example set by teachers, and a conducive learning environment [1], [28], [29]. Repetitive routines such as eating together at school have been proven effective in strengthening self-regulation, rule-following, and behavioral control in children, as children learn through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement provided by teachers [3], [4], [10], [30]-[32].

Teachers not only serve as providers of technical instructions regarding meal etiquette, but also as role models who directly demonstrate disciplined behavior, such as queuing orderly, washing hands before and after eating, sitting properly, and tidying up after meals [29], [32]. The role of teachers as mentors and facilitators is reflected through responsive interactions, clear but non-coercive guidance, and reinforcement of positive behavior through praise, verbal motivation, and simple but meaningful appreciation for children [33]. The strategies used include direct modeling, consistent repetition of routines, integration of songs and prayers to build a religious and structured atmosphere, and the application of positive reinforcement, which has been proven to increase children's compliance and active participation [28], [29].

A communicative, warm, and pleasant approach during lunch also plays an important role in creating a sense of psychological security so that children feel comfortable going through each stage of the activity without pressure [29], [30]. A safe and supportive environment allows children to learn self-control and gradually understand the consequences of rules. Teachers' consistency in applying rules and routines without being authoritarian helps children develop disciplined habits that are internalized as part of their self-awareness, rather than mere momentary obedience [31], [32]. The results of interviews in this study indicate that the strategies implemented by teachers have a real impact on increasing children's independence in preparing and tidying up eating utensils, their ability to follow procedures without always being reminded, and their regular behavior during activities.

3.3 The Role of Parents in Supporting Shared Lunch Education

The success of character building through shared lunches cannot be separated from the active involvement of parents in continuing the habit-forming process that has been established in the school environment [34], [35]. Synergy between schools and families is a key factor in ensuring that disciplinary values are not only practiced situationally, but are truly internalized in children's daily lives [34], [36]. Parental involvement in instilling positive behaviors, including clean and orderly living habits, has a significant effect on the stability of self-regulation and consistency of behavior in early childhood [35], [37], [38]. Parents serve as the primary role models at home who reinforce the value of discipline through practical examples, such as teaching children to eat on time, wash their hands before and after meals, sit properly, and tidy up their eating utensils after use [36], [38]. Consistent role modeling sends an implicit message to children that rules are not just school requirements, but part of a way of life that must be practiced in various contexts.

In addition to setting an example, direct guidance and proportional supervision from parents also strengthen the internalization of discipline values [34], [38]. Children who receive guidance with a warm but firm approach tend to demonstrate better self-control than children who only receive instructions without emotional support [39], [40]. In the context of shared lunches, most parents continue the routines taught by teachers at school, such as maintaining hand hygiene, not being overly picky about food, and eating in an orderly manner. This practice reflects parents' awareness that character building requires consistency across environments [35], [36].

Effective communication between teachers and parents also plays an important role in helping to create continuity in habit formation [41], [42]. The exchange of information regarding children's development, difficulties encountered, and strategies implemented at school enables parents to apply similar approaches at home. Structured collaboration between school and home can improve the success of character building programs because children receive consistent messages and rules from the two main environments in their lives [43], [44]. Children who receive similar reinforcement both at school and at home tend to show more stable, consistent, and long-lasting disciplinary development [36], [38]. Thus, parental support is not merely complementary, but an essential component in ensuring the effectiveness of shared lunchtime education as a means of shaping the character and discipline of young children.

3.4 Lunch Education as a Strategy for Building Discipline

Research findings indicate that shared lunch education is an effective strategy in shaping the character and discipline of early childhood because this activity provides concrete experiences that are appropriate for children's developmental characteristics and bridges the gap between good behavior at home and at school, so that children receive consistent messages about values from both environments [45]-[47]. In this context, shared lunches can be seen as a form of concrete learning that involves repetitive routines, social interaction, and the enforcement of simple rules that continuously provide children with opportunities to learn self-regulation, self-control, and behavioral regularity in real-life situations [45], [48], [49]. In line with Jean Piaget's principle of

learning by doing, children learn through meaningful hands-on activities, while teachers serve as role models in these activities, supporting the social learning process as described by Albert Bandura, who emphasizes the role of social reinforcement and observation in learning discipline.

Teacher assistance during lunch reflects Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, in which children are gradually helped to become independent in following simple rules such as queuing, washing their hands, and eating neatly, so that the discipline they learn is not only through following instructions but also through social support from educators [38], [50], [51]. Shared lunchtime education also represents character building according to James Lickona through the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and moral actions that occur simultaneously in daily activities, so that the values of discipline, responsibility, and order are not only taught verbally but also practiced in an authentic social context [52], [53].

In the same vein, research on school-family collaboration confirms that the continuity of values taught at school, supported by the family environment, will strengthen the internalization of discipline in children, as children receive consistent messages between school activities such as eating together and habits at home [54]. The positive reinforcement provided by teachers during lunch in the form of praise, verbal encouragement, and recognition of disciplined behavior also accelerates the internalization of disciplined behavior as part of children's daily habits, so that character education through shared lunches can serve as an effective and sustainable model of social learning.

3.5 The Impact of Shared Lunch Education on Children's Independence and Responsibility

Lunch education not only serves to meet children's nutritional needs, but also acts as a strategic means of internalizing the values of discipline, independence, and responsibility through a structured socialization process and behavioral regulation that takes place during mealtimes. Children's involvement in organized meal routines, such as queuing orderly, washing their hands before and after eating, using eating utensils independently, and cleaning up after meals, provides concrete experiences that support the development of self-regulation and self-control from an early age [10], [11], [12].

Routines that are carried out consistently in a positive social context strengthen children's ability to control their impulses, wait their turn, and understand the consequences of their actions, so that disciplined behavior is not only external due to teacher supervision, but develops into internal awareness. The experience of successfully completing independent tasks in daily activities, including eating together, can increase children's self-confidence and intrinsic motivation because they feel a real sense of competence [55]. Thus, shared lunch education can be understood as a pedagogical practice that integrates nutritional aspects, habit formation, and character development into one contextual activity. The process of habit formation that takes place repeatedly in a supportive atmosphere encourages children not only to follow rules, but also to understand the meaning of responsibility towards themselves and their surroundings.

The development of discipline through shared lunchtime education is optimized when supported by strong synergy between schools and families as the two main environments for early childhood development [43], [44]. Schools serve as formal learning spaces that provide structured habits, consistent rules, and teacher guidance in instilling discipline through practical activities such as queuing, maintaining cleanliness, and eating in an orderly manner [38]. However, the internalization of these values will be further strengthened when the home environment functions as an extension that reflects and reinforces the same habits. Consistency in habit formation practices and continuity of values between home and school contribute significantly to the development of self-regulation, compliance with rules, and the formation of children's social responsibility.

The family environment plays a strategic role in providing positive reinforcement and consistent rules that help children internalize disciplined behavior as part of their daily lifestyle, rather than simply as a situational obligation at school [35], [37]. Active collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting children's social-emotional learning has a positive impact on strengthening discipline and responsibility [44]. Thus, the synergy between schools and families in implementing shared lunch programs not only impacts children's physical health, but also strengthens the formation of character traits such as discipline, independence, and social responsibility. When the values taught at school are consistently reinforced at home through role modeling and consistent habits, children gain coherent and meaningful learning experiences, allowing values such as discipline to develop into part of their consciousness and identity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that shared lunch education is an effective strategy in shaping the discipline of early childhood through the habit of clean and healthy living. A series of structured activities, such as washing hands, praying before eating, eating in an orderly manner, tidying up eating utensils, and brushing teeth after eating, have been proven to gradually foster discipline, independence, and responsibility in children. The role of teachers is crucial to the success of shared lunch education. Teachers' exemplary behavior, consistency in habit formation, and positive reinforcement help children internalize disciplined behavior as part of their daily routine.

This strategy also supports children's holistic development, including cognitive, social, emotional, and moral aspects. In addition, parental support plays an important role in reinforcing healthy habits at home. The synergy between school and family ensures that healthy living behaviors are not only practiced at school but also sustained in children's daily lives. Thus, shared lunch education functions not only as a routine activity but also as a vehicle for contextual, meaningful, and relevant character education applicable to early childhood education institutions.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Andini Hardiningrum played a role in formulating the research, developing a theoretical framework for early childhood education, conducting formal analysis of the data, visualizing the research results, and reviewing and editing the manuscript substantially. Jauharotur Rihlah contributed to the development of the research methodology design, supervised the entire research process, managed the project administration, and ensured the suitability of the study with the pedagogical context of early childhood education. Nur Idhofi Aliya was responsible for conducting field investigations, collecting and curating data, drafting the initial manuscript, and conducting preliminary analysis of the research results. Firdaus contributed to the data validation process, strengthened the analysis of clean and healthy living behaviors from a pediatric nursing perspective, and reviewed the manuscript in relation to child health and safety aspects. All authors were involved in discussions about the research results, provided critical input, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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