

A Study on Parental Decisions and Meal Preparation Challenges Influencing Children's Eating Habits

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ABSTRACT

The eating patterns of children are a complex interaction of the choice of their parents, the mode of preparing meals and their preferences especially when it comes to packed school lunches. Knowledge of these factors is crucial towards improving the nutritional value of lunches, as well as the actual consumption habits of the children. The current study was to investigate the influences on the quality of packed school lunch and children eating behaviour, parents influence and difficulty with preparation. The research design used was descriptive survey research and 100 pre-adolescent children aged between 9-12 years were used and sampled using a structured questionnaire that was administered, using an online platform. The measured aspects of parental involvement, nutrition awareness, information sources, and the impediments to making nutritious lunches. To maintain the clarity and reliability of the tool, a pilot study was carried out. The data was analysed with descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics, such as the Spearman rank correlation and ANOVA one-way test. The result has revealed that there is a statistically significant but weak negative correlation between determinants of lunch decisions and the number of uneaten foods indicating that the number of uneaten foods can be reduced by planning and considering of all issues. Also, there were considerable differences in obstacles to packing healthy lunches in relation to the various criteria of study, and as a result, age and level of independence differences were identified. On balance, it is possible to note that the work highlights the necessity of making informed choices and setting context-related priorities in enhancing the quality of lunch and the eating behaviour of children, as well as the problem of food waste in schools.

Keywords: Parental decision-making, Meal preparation challenges, Children's eating pattern, Dietary influences, Lunchbox quality

INTRODUCTION

The food habits of children are formed at a very tender age and heavily depend on the environment at home where parents have a major role to play in the development of food habits. In the case of school-going children, homemade packed lunches form an important part of daily food intake and quality of diet. Parents being the main decision-makers can define the kind, the nature, and the quality of foods to be included in the lunchboxes. Nonetheless, such choices are usually influenced by a variety of restrictions, such as availability of time, cost, convenience and preferences of children that can restrict the consideration of the nutritionally balanced choices.

Past studies have always raised issues of nutritional content of packed school lunch. As an example, Sweitzer S J et al. (2010) noticed that most lunches did not contain sufficient portions of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, meaning the discrepancy between the nutrition guidelines and their implementation. Likewise, Hawthorne D L et al. (2018) observed that time constraints, shortage of resources and conflicting duties are practical challenges to parents that can adversely affect meal preparation. Their research also indicated the discrepancy between the

reported and real lunch-packing patterns which implied that the perceptions of parents and real behaviours may not be consistently consistent.

The attitudes and judgment of the parents also affect the quality of lunch. Research by Ensaff H et al. (2018) and Lindquist K et al. (2023) states that parents often argue on the one hand, offering healthy foods and on the other hand, being sure that children will be ready to take them, often choosing acceptability over the nutritional value of foods. Besides that, wider evidence compiled by O'Rourke B et al. (2020) indicates that aspects like knowledge gaps, habits, and environmental factors also influence lunch-packing behaviours. The more recent qualitative findings of Crossley S et al. (2025) and Habhab S (2025) underline that the process of making decisions about lunch by parents is dynamic and is subject to the influence of routine constraints, and family contexts, and emerging studies by Lalchandani N K et al. (2025) also suggest that the idea of sustainability and low-waste practices in the preparation of lunch are becoming a consideration.

Besides the preparation of meals, the eating habits of children are also of great significance to the real dietary intake. It has been indicated that much of packed food is usually not consumed thus resulting in a low intake of nutrients and also food waste. Research by Martins M L et al. (2020) and that of Yoder A B B et al. (2015) indicates that the preferences of children, size of portions and social determinants influence consumption and waste. The behavioral approach, including the studies discussed by Boulet M et al. (2019), proves that a specific set of strategies can be used to minimize food waste at school. Moreover, the capacity of the children to accurately remember the foods taken is low, as observed by Warren J M et al. (2003) and this further complicates the act of determining actual intake.

Intervention-based research allows concluding that the quality and consumption of lunch can be improved. Indicatively, Hendy H M et al. (2005) and Koch P A et al. (2021) showed that school-based programs organized can increase acceptance and consumption of fruits and vegetables in children. This result indicates that the eating behaviours in children are influenced by the parental practice as well as external interventions.

Even though the literature on the topic is increasing, there is still the necessity to conduct combined research that will explore the issues of parental choice, challenges in meal preparation, and patterns of children consumption. Most of the studies available on these aspects do so separately, and it is not possible to gain a wholesome perspective of their effects. Thus, the current research paper will delve into the relationship between parental choice and constrained preparation and the quality of packed school lunch, and the eating behaviors of children so that the dietary habits of school-aged children are better understood in terms of various factors that can affect them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyse the eating habits of children (and especially packed school lunches), many interrelated factors should be considered. These are parental, meal preparation, environmental, and personal preferences of children. Current literature portrays the interplay between these aspects to influence not only the kind of food prepared to be taken to school, but also the degree to which it is eaten.

The role of parents on eating habits of children

Parents also take a leading role in court the eating habits of children since children tend to follow what they see at home. Daily contact with parents tends to teach them the food preferences, eating habits and perception of nutrition. Studies by Mahmood L et al. (2021) indicate that children do imitate the eating habits of their parents which supports the notion that parental behaviour is a powerful model.

Besides habits concerning the overall food consumption, the parental approach to feeding is also an issue. John Ada et al. (2025) emphasize that the structured and supportive feeding habits have higher chances of promoting healthy eating, whereas excessively flexible or unreliable feeding habits can result in the less desirable food options. Meanwhile, food-related choices are more complicated because of nutritional objectives and preferences of children that parents must follow, as opposed to choosing the healthy ones.

Influence of Home Food Practices on Children's Food Acceptance

The quality of children diet is highly conditioned by the home environment with the focus on cooking and meal preparation practices. Making meals at home has been known to lead to more healthy diets and overall nutritional results (Dimple D & Ramesh Gowri, 2023). When kids are engaged in it, they tend to become more interested and receptive to a wider variety of foods, especially the healthier ones (Chu Yen Li et al., 2013).

These advantages notwithstanding, it is not always clear how to prepare meals consistently. Parents, in turn, often mention the lack of time and a hectic schedule as well as the inability to plan the food they cook at home (Jones B L et al., 2023). These issues usually reach into the management of school lunches too.

Lunchbox Preparation Decision-Making among parents

Assembling a school lunch is something that is a daily routine, and a few choices are to be made, usually, in a hurry. Research indicates that the parents would not make their decision based on nutrition but other factors like convenience, price, and the probability that the child would consume the food (Boyd W et al., 2025). In a similar way, Nanayakkara J et al. (2024) discovered that the type and quality of items packed could be limited by factors such as the lack of time, finances, and unwillingness of children to consume some foods.

The process of lunchbox preparation, therefore, is often a matter of choosing between what is best and what is feasible thus bringing out the issue of life as it is in the real world.

The Quality of packed lunch and the interventions

As a topic of concern, the quality of packed school lunches as far as nutrition is concerned has been a popular issue in the literature. Numerous studies have shown that lunchboxes do not necessarily follow the nutritional guidelines especially regarding the consumption of adequate fruits and vegetables. Nevertheless, studies also indicate that some improvements can be made. Indicatively, Nathan N et al. (2019) established that structured interventions, in particular, parent-school interventions, can result in a healthier choice of food and greater consumption of food in children.

These results indicate that although there are obstacles, specific interventions can be effective in changing the nutrition of children.

Food Waste and Consumption Patterns of children

The value of a packed lunch is dependent on what the child consumes. Several research indicate that there is discrepancy in food packed by parents and food consumed by children. Unhealthy products are not consumed (Pearson N et al., 2021) which minimizes the consumption of nutrients and adds to the food waste.

Children may change their eating behaviour depending on the taste preferences, amount of food taken, and social factors in school (Martins M L et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been determined that a significant part of the nutrients is wasted across uneaten food (Thomas J R et al., 2023). Fruits and vegetables are also notably likely to be thrown out even though they were put into the lunchboxes (Yoder A B B et al., 2015).

The other problem with interpreting consumption patterns is the fact that children cannot be able to accurately recall what they have consumed and therefore it is hard to determine what they consume (Warren J M et al., 2003).

Personal and Environmental Effects on Eating Behaviour

Eating habits of children are also influenced by personal traits, as well as by the school climate in general. As an example, food preferences may have a powerful impact on the healthy food of customers, particularly children with needs, which results in the lack of diet diversification (Seiverling L et al., 2022). Moreover, the eating behaviour can be influenced in other ways by outside influences like peer pressure, taste, and the availability of foods available at schools (Payan D D et al., 2017).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample Selection and Research Design

The researcher used the descriptive survey design to investigate the determinants of packed lunch quality and eating habits of children. This method was deemed to be suitable since it enables one to observe and study real-world behaviour without controlling variables.

The sample was composed of pre-adolescent children between the age group of 9-12 years because this age group is starting to form their own preferences in food and is still affected by the choices of the parents. The participants sampled were 100 individuals who were recruited through a convenience sampling method due to their availability and willingness to take part in the study. This sampling method could be associated with the limitation of generalizing the results, but it was deemed appropriate to this exploratory study to determine the preliminary patterns and associations.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was performed before the actual survey to determine the adequacy and efficacy of the research tool. The number of parents who were involved in the study and completed the questionnaire is fifty.

The main aim was to test the clarity, the reliability and general structure of the questions. Participant feedback was used to determine the areas that need to be improved, including wording and order of questions. Based on this feedback, some adjustments were carried out to create a better quality of the final questionnaire by making necessary adjustments to increase clarity and logical flow.

Data Collection

The structured questionnaire was used to obtain the data which was aimed at capturing the main characteristics of children eating habits and lunchbox activities. The survey consisted of questions associated with parental role in meal preparation, nutrition knowledge, information sources, and determinants of food preferences.

There were both the use of a nominal and ordinal scales to guarantee the data collection was all round. Categorization of demographic variables and types of food was performed using nominal scales, whereas frequency, preferences, and the level of agreement were evaluated using ordinal scales.

The questionnaire was conducted via internet platform (Google Forms), which made its distribution and data collection very easy. This approach also reduced the number of manual errors and improved organization of the responses. Nonetheless, the data were self-reported and therefore, there is a risk of response bias, which can compromise the accuracy of the reported behaviours.

Data Analysis

The gathered information was tabulated and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. General trends in the data were summarized using descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies and percentages.

Spearman rank correlation test was used to test the relationship between factors affecting lunch choices and the rate of not eating food. Also, ANOVA was employed one-way to determine the differences in the perceived barriers and source of information between various groups. All the statistical procedures were done at $p < 0.05$.

Tabulation and Interpretation

Finally, the data that have been analysed were tabulated in a systematic way and presented in forms of tabular and chart analysis to make the analysis and comparison easier.

The results were discussed according to the study aims, and it was necessary to discover strong correlations between parental decision-making, meal preparation difficulties, and eating behaviours of children. This stage

was carried out with ethical integrity and confidentiality and all data pertaining to participants was kept anonymous.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the current research are valuable data on the aspects determining the quality of packed school lunches and the food consumption behaviour of children. It is analysed in terms of the influence of parental choices, meal preparation and external forces on the eating behaviours in children. The interpretation of statistical results was aimed at main relation and variance between variables. Such findings are also explained using the available literature to support their relevance and significance towards enhancing the diets of children

Table 1. Spearman correlation test

Spearman's rho		Food leftover frequency	Factors influencing lunch choice
Food leftover frequency	Correlation coefficient sig. (2 – tailed) N	1.000 . 100	-.218 .030 100
Factors influencing lunch choice	Correlation coefficient sig. (2 – tailed) N	-.218 .030 100	1.000 . 100

The correlation analysis based on the Spearman rank correlation was conducted to learn about the correlation between the variables which affect the choice of lunch and the rate of the rest of the food sent back by the children. The results show that there is a weak negative relationship between the two variables ($\rho = -0.218$) and the relationship is significant at the 5 percent level ($p = 0.030$).

This finding implies that the more effort is devoted to the preferences of children, the nutritional issues, and a responsible consideration of what to pack in the lunch, the lesser the quantity of leftover food. Even though the strength of the relationship is rather low, its statistical significance demonstrates that these factors are significant influencing the eating behaviour of children.

In real life, the implications of the findings are that the better and more thoughtful the decision made by parents or caregivers when preparing the lunch, the more the children are likely to eat what they are being given. This, in its turn, can help to minimize food wastage. Altogether, the discussion reveals the role of mindful lunch planning as an aspect that may make a positive impact on the eating habits of children.

Table 2. Anova test

Between groups	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
within groups	232.066	4	58.016	3.302	.014
	1668.924	95	17.568		
	1900.990	99			

The ANOVA was performed in a one-way format to determine whether the barriers to packing a healthy lunch were found to vary among children of various standards of the study. The results of the analysis showed that the

difference between the groups is statistically significant ($F = 2.850, p = 0.028$), showing that all groups do not have similar difficulties when it comes to making healthy lunches.

This observation implies that with advancement in the various standards, the type of challenges encountered by the parents or caregivers can vary. Some of the differences may be due to changing food tastes, growing autonomy of kids, time limitation and dissimilar anticipations.

In practical use, the findings point to the fact that a blanket solution is not necessarily efficient when it comes to solving the lunch preparation challenges. Rather, the type of strategies used should be based on age and the level of education of the child to provide more favourable results to healthy eating habits. Overall, the discussion highlights the significance of knowledge on age-related obstacles to enhance the quality of packed school lunch.

Table 3. Anova test

Between groups	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
within groups	553.396	4	138.349	2.850	.028
	4611.044	95	48.537		
	5164.440	99			

One-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in the barriers to packing a healthy lunch between children of different standards of the study. The results showed that the groups differ statistically significantly ($F = 2.850, p = 0.028$) meaning that the obstacles that come with the preparation of healthy lunches are not the same among all age groups.

This implies that the character of challenges encountered by parents or caregivers could be different with the level of schooling of the children. As children become older, the nature of barriers may change depending on varying taste preferences, more independence in food choices and external influences.

Practically speaking, the findings demonstrate that age-related strategies should be utilized when it comes to the issue of healthy lunch preparation. The knowledge of such differences will aid in coming up with better strategies through which the parents can be assisted in giving healthy food which will eventually lead to a better eating pattern among the children.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study was to assess the determinants that affect the quality of the packed school lunch and the eating patterns of children with certain focus paid to the issues of parental decision making and the problems of preparing the meal. The results reveal that the eating habits of children are influenced by parental practices and individuality as well as contextual factors in the home and school settings.

The findings suggest that careful consideration of the factors like nutritional value, preferences of children, and proper planning of meals can help in achieving a reduction in the number of uneaten foods thus, minimizing food wastage. Simultaneously, the research shows that obstacles to preparing healthy lunches are not all-encompassing and are likely to be diverse among various age groups and manifest the shift in autonomy, preferences, and external factors that affect children as they advance through their schooling.

These results are supported by the reviewed literature due to the importance of parental influence, feeding and home food environment in determining the eating habits of children. The approach of methodology that was used in the present study also facilitated a systematic interpretation of such relationships as both a descriptive and inferential analysis.

Overall, the given study helps to highlight the significance of following a more moderate and context-dependent attitude towards food preparation during lunch, considering both the nutritional and feasible factors that parents have to confront. The conversation of the age-specific issues and the promotion of informed choices may be instrumental in enhancing the quality of the lunch and promoting the development of healthier consumption behaviours of children. These observations can be helpful to parents, educators, and policymakers to have strategies to assist parents in adopting healthier eating habits and minimise food wastage in schools.

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