

ID 124

**Factors influencing the diet of preschool children in rural areas, Sri Lanka: Parents' perceptions**

**S.F. Sashna<sup>1\*</sup> and M.S.F. Sirasa<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Applied Nutrition, Faculty of Livestock, Fisheries and Nutrition, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka

**Abstract**

Childhood malnutrition is a public health threat in the developing countries like Sri Lanka. Preschoolers under the age of five are in a vulnerable stage of development, and the diet they consume during early period affects their development and growth, and their future health. Dietary behaviours practice during the young ages tend to continue throughout the whole life. Parents are the “gatekeepers” of young children’s food consumption pattern and understanding parents’ perception on children’s diet is necessary to modify children’s dietary behaviours. Exploration of parents’ perception on factors influencing children’s diet were reported in urban locations of Sri Lanka, but not in rural areas. Therefore, current study was conducted with seven focus groups adopting partial nominal technique, including 47 participants who are the parents of preschool children in rural communities in Anuradhapura District, Sri Lanka. Parents were given a list of 25 potential factors and asked to rank the six most influential and select the six least influential for their children’s dietary behaviour. Factors selected by majority within the group were further discussed and the discussions were audio recorded. Based on verbatim written transcription of the focus groups, qualitative data were extracted by content analysis. Factors selected by participants were categorized into three levels: individual, family and peer, and community. Individual level of child preferences, family and peer level of family food budget, maternal control, peers eating behaviours, and community level factors of food price and accessibility of the shops were ranked as most influential factors. Based on selection, child’s gender, nutrition knowledge of the child, family size, availability of foods in shops and community cultural beliefs were identified as least influential factors. Additionally, lengthy mealtime and television advertising were also suggested as the influential factors by the participants. Since the influence of factors differ based on the context, exploration is necessary to design tailor made healthy dietary interventions for children in other locations.

**Key words:** Child diet, Malnutrition, Parental perception, Rural population, Sri Lanka

**\*Corresponding Author:** [fathimashazna982@gmail.com](mailto:fathimashazna982@gmail.com)