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Comprehension Level and Parenting Culture with Feeding Behavior of Toddlers in Tulungagung Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract
Malnutrition in infancy is irreversible on growth and development, so toddlers need adequate and quality food intake. The factors that indirectly cause malnutrition in toddlers are parenting patterns. Mothers' parenting patterns that are not good in feeding toddlers can be caused by low mothers' comprehension and behavior in choosing food. This study aims to know comprehension level and parenting culture with the feeding behavior of toddlers in Tulungagung Regency. This study used an analytical observational research design with a cross-sectional study approach. The respondents amounted to 72 mothers of toddlers. The research instrument used a questionnaire and then analyzed using a chi-square test. The majority of mothers with toddlers had good comprehension about nutrition and food intake for toddlers, ideal parenting culture, and adequate feeding behavior. Based on the analysis using chi-square, the comprehension level had a relationship with feeding behavior in toddlers (p-value of 0.013), while parenting culture had no relationship with feeding behavior in toddlers (p-value of 0.270). The conclusion is there is a relationship between the comprehension level and the feeding behavior of toddlers and there is no relationship between parenting culture and the feeding behavior of toddlers.

Keywords: Mother's Comprehension Level, Parenting Culture, Feeding Behavior.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Growth is when there is an increase in the number and size of cells so that there is a change in physical body size (Yulizawati & Afrah, 2022). The period of infancy and toddlers is a crucial period of growth because there is rapid growth in the organs of the body. Infants and toddlers will grow optimally if parents can maximize this golden age by providing appropriate nutrients (Matzeller et al., 2024). Malnutrition in toddlers can also cause stunted growth, so toddlers do not have the energy to conduct their activities. The toddlers also become susceptible to infection, inhibit brain development, and change in behavior such as restlessness, and fussiness, and in the end, the toddlers become less responsive to the environment (Fadjriah et al., 2021).

Based on data from UNICEF, 19,826 out of 161,188 children in 47 developing countries were reported to have significant cognitive delays (Emerson, 2020). In another study, around 154.8 million toddlers in developing countries experienced stunted growth with the second largest number being in the Asian region with 59% of cases (Naila et al., 2021). Growth and development are irreversible (cannot be returned), and occur due to malnutrition in toddlerhood. Parenting style directly influence feeding behaviors. Poor knowledge or neglectful parenting can lead to inadequate nutrition, contributing to issues like stunting (Azzahra et al., 2024). Parenting style is a technique applied by mothers to children related to styles and situations in eating. It is very important to pay attention to the quality and quantity of food needed by children, which will eventually be manifested in feeding activities in order to improve children's nutritional status (Limardi et al., 2022). The mother's behavior is closely related to the issue of malnutrition in children. It can be known through inappropriate habits by mothers on how to fulfill nutrition in toddlers. Malnutrition in toddlers can also be caused by the mother's behavior in choosing inappropriate food, in which the food is inadequate and the variety of food is limited (Kalhoff et al., 2024).

Nutritional deficiencies among toddlers remain a critical public health issue in Tulungagung Regency, East Java. According to the 2022 Indonesia Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI), the prevalence of stunting among children under five in Tulungagung Regency reached 17.3%, while the average for East Java Province was 19.2%, reflecting a persistent burden of child undernutrition in the region (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2022). A study by (Lasman et al., 2022) in Posyandu Wajak Lor Village found a significant correlation between mothers' nutritional knowledge and toddlers' nutritional status, with 56.2% of mothers having good nutritional knowledge, yet 12.5% of toddlers still suffered from poor nutritional status. This highlights the need for improved maternal education on nutrition, given their pivotal role in determining dietary intake. Further reinforcing this urgency, (Krisdyana et al., 2025) revealed that while most stunted and severely stunted toddlers in Tulungagung were born with normal weight and length, 80.3% of severely stunted toddlers were underweight. This suggests that post-natal factors, such as feeding practices and caregiving, significantly contribute to malnutrition. The study also found that male toddlers were more susceptible to stunting, possibly due to higher physical activity levels and differing caregiving approaches. Additionally, (Wardani et al., 2023) emphasized poor dietary habits among toddlers in Tulungagung, including insufficient consumption of vegetables, fruits, and vitamin A supplementation, exacerbating malnutrition risks. These findings underscore the pressing need for research on malnutrition's impact in Tulungagung, as it affects not only physical growth but also cognitive development and future productivity. Effective interventions, including maternal education and improved feeding practices, are essential to address this persistent issue.

Based on the background above, as an example in previous research in Tulungagung Regency regarding comprehension, parenting culture, and feeding behavior, this study aims to investigate the relationship between maternal comprehension level, parenting culture, and feeding behavior among toddlers in Tulungagung Regency. By addressing these objectives, this

study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving feeding practices and reducing the prevalence of malnutrition among toddlers in the region.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used an analytical observational research design with a Cross-Sectional Study approach. The population in this study was mothers who had children aged 6-59 months in January-July 2022 in Tulungagung Regency, totaling 72 people. The sample in this study were mothers who had toddlers (aged 6-59 months) in January-July 2022 totaling 72 people and meeting the inclusion criteria as a research sample. The sample was determined using the total sampling technique. The research population is less than 100 people or is considered small, then the research sample can be taken as a whole without the risk of bias due to random sample section (Makwana et al., 2023). The inclusion criteria in this study were mothers who were willing to fill out the questionnaire provided and mothers who had children aged 6-59 months. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria were mothers with toddlers with congenital abnormalities in the digestive system, nervous system, hormonal system, and digestive enzymes, and mothers who were illiterate.

Data was collected through questionnaire to assess mother's comprehension level related to nutrition and good intake, parenting culture, and feeding behavior. The research instrument consisted of a validated questionnaire assessing three key domains: maternal nutritional knowledge, parenting culture, and feeding practices. Validity testing using Pearson Product Moment correlation (conducted with 51 mothers of toddlers) demonstrated strong construct validity, with all items showing calculated r-values exceeding the critical table value (0.279) at α=0.05. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.898, significantly surpassing the 0.6 threshold, indicating excellent internal consistency of the measurement tool. Data analysis proceeded in three phases: univariate analysis for frequency distributions, bivariate analysis using Chi-Square test to examine associations between demographic characteristics (age, education, occupation, family composition) and primary study variables (nutritional knowledge, parenting culture), and multivariate logistic regression to identify significant predictors of feeding behavior. The study protocol received ethical approval from the Medical Faculty Ethics Committee at Brawijaya University (Approval No. 190/EC/KEPK/07/2022), ensuring compliance with international standards for human subject research including informed consent procedures and data confidentiality measures.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Maternal Characteristics by Nutrition Knowledge level, Parenting Culture and Feeding Behavior

Characteristics	Comprehension Level				Parenting Culture				Feeding Behavior				Total	
of Mother	Fair	%	Good	%	Fair	%	Ideal	%	Fair	%	Good	%	f	%
Age														
21-35 years old	16	22.2	37	51.4	27	37.5	26	36.1	36	50.0	17	23.6	53	73.6*)
>35 years old	4	5.6	15	20.8	8	11.1	11	15.3	13	18.1	6	8.3	19	26.4
Last Education														
Elementary School- Junior High School	11	15.3	16	22.2	15	20.8	12	16.7	21	29.2	6	8.3	27	37.5
Senior High School-College	9	12.5	36	50	20	27.8	25	34.7	28	38.9	17	23.6	45	62.5*)
Occupation														
Housewife	10	13.9	33	45.8	17	23.6	26	36.1	31	43.1	12	16.6	43	59.7*)
Working	10	13.9	19	26.4	18	25.0	11	15.3	18	25.0	11	15.3	29	40.3
Number of Children														
1-2	17	23.6	44	61.1	31	43.0	30	41.7	41	56.9	20	27.8	61	84.7*)
>2	3	4.2	8	11.1	4	5.6	7	9.7	8	11.1	3	4.2	11	15.3
Child's Age														
6-36 Months	17	23.6	34	47.2	24	33.3	27	37.5	37	51.4	14	19.4	51	70.8*)

37-59 Months	3	4.2	18	25.0	11	15.3	10	13.9	12	16.7	9	12.5	21	29.2
Number of Family Members														
Small (<5)	16	22.2	38	52.8	28	38.9	26	36.1	37	51.4	17	23.6	54	75.0*)
Middle (≥5)	4	5.6	14	19.5	7	9.7	11	15.3	12	16.7	6	8.3	18	25.0
Total	20	27.8	52	72.2	35	48.6	37	51.4	49	68.1	23	31.9	72	100.0

**) The highest/biggest percentage*

As presented in Table 1, these findings suggest that younger age, higher educational background, non-working status, fewer children, younger child age, and smaller family size are associated with better maternal comprehension of nutrition and proper food practices, better feeding behavior, and ideal parenting for toddlers aged 6–59 months. The demographic distribution indicates that these factors may play a role in shaping more adaptive and developmentally supportive parenting practices.

Table 2. Logistic Analysis of feeding behavior in toddlers aged 6-59 months

Characteristics of Mother	**Feeding Behavior**				**Total**		***p-value***	**Odd Ratio**
	Fair	**%**	**Good**	**%**	**f**	**%**		
Age								
21-35 years old	36	50.0	17	23.6	53	73.6*)	0.968	0.977
>35 years old	13	18.1	6	8.3	19	26.4		
Last Education								
Elementary School- Junior High School	21	29.2	6	8.3	27	37.5	0.175	2.125
Senior High School-College	28	38.9	17	23.6	45	62.5*)		
Occupation								
Housewife	31	43.1	12	16.6	43	59.7*)	0.372	1.579
Working	18	25.0	11	15.3	29	40.3		
Number of Children								
1-2	41	56.9	20	27.8	61	84.7*)	0.719	0.769
>2	8	11.1	3	4.2	11	15.3		
Child's Age								
6-36 Months	37	51.4	14	19.4	51	70.8*)	0.206	1.982
37-59 Months	12	16.7	9	12.5	21	29.2		
Number of Family Members								
1-2	41	56.9	20	27.8	61	84.7*)	0.884	1.088
>2	8	11.1	3	4.2	11	15.3		
Comprehension Level								
Fair	18	25.0	2	2.8	20	27.8	0.023	6.097
Good	31	43.1	21	29.2	52	72.2*)		
Parenting Culture								
Fair	26	36.1	9	12.5	35	48.6	0.270	1.758
Ideal	23	31.9	14	19.4	37	51.4*)		
Total	49	68.1	23	31.9	72	100.0		

**) The highest/biggest percentage*

Based on Table 2, the result of the analysis using SPSS 26 with the Chi-Square Test show that there are not statistically significant relationship between the mother's age, education level, occupation, number of children, child's age, and number of family members with feeding behavior in toddlers. The relationship between comprehension level and feeding behavior in

toddlers aged 6-59 months show a p-value or significance value of 0.023 (<0.05), which means that H1 is accepted. Therefore, it indicates that there is a significant relationship between Comprehension level and feeding behavior in toddlers. On Odds ratio analysis obtained value 6,097 which shows that respondents with Comprehension good ones have good feeding behavior 6,097 times greater than the respondent who have level of Comprehension sufficient. The relationship between parenting culture and feeding behavior in toddlers aged 6-59 months show a p-value or significance value of 0.270 (>0.05), which means that H0 is accepted. Therefore, it indicates that there is no significant relationship between parenting culture and feeding behavior in toddlers.

Table 3. Feasibility Analysis of Independent Variables for Multivariate Test Model.

Sub Variable	***p-value***
Age	0.968
Last Education	0.175
Occupation	0.372
Number of Children	0.719
Child's Age	0.206
Number of Family Members	0.884
Comprehension Level	0.023
Parenting Culture	0.272

Table 2 shows that the multivariate analysis was conducted to determine which independent variables were eligible for inclusion based on a p-value threshold of < 0.25 using the method in simple logistic regression. Of the eight variables tested, three met the eligibility criteria: last education (p = 0.175), child's age (p = 0.206), and comprehension level (p = 0.023). These variables were included in the multivariate model. Meanwhile, variables such as age, occupation, number of children, number of family members, and parenting culture were excluded due to higher p-values (≥ 0.25), indicating insufficient statistical association with the dependent variable. This selection process ensured that only relevant predictors were considered in the final model to improve the robustness of the analysis.

Table 4. Most Influential Factors on Feeding Behavior in toddlers aged 6-59 months.

Variables	**B**	**Wald**	***p-value***	**OR**	**95% CI**
Step 1[a]					
Comprehension Level	1.644	4.110	0.043	5.173	1.056-25.340
Last Education	0.460	0.610	0.435	1.584	0.499-5.028
Child's Age	0.399	0.491	0.484	1.491	0.488-4.555
Step 2[a]					
Comprehension Level	1.703	4.470	0.034	5.493	1.132-26.643
Last Education	0.513	0.776	0.378	1.671	0.533-5.235
Step 3[a]					
Comprehension Level	1.808	5.143	0.023	6.097	1.278-29.082

Table 4 presents the factors influencing eating behavior among children aged 6–59 months, analyzed through logistic regression in three steps. In Step 1, three variables were examined: Comprehension Level, Last Education, and Child's Age. Comprehension Level showed a significant positive influence, with a coefficient (B) of 1.644, a Wald value of 4.110, and a p-value of 0.043, yielding an odds ratio (OR) of 5.173 (95% CI: 1.056–25.340). This indicates that a higher comprehension level increases the likelihood of better eating behavior

by approximately 5.173 times compared to a lower level. In contrast, Last Education (B = 0.460, p = 0.435, OR = 1.584) and Child's Age (B = 0.399, p = 0.484, OR = 1.491) did not show significant effects. In Step 2, Comprehension Level remained significant (B = 1.703, p = 0.034, OR = 5.493), while Last Education (B = 0.513, p = 0.378, OR = 1.671) continued to show no significant influence. In Step 3, only Comprehension Level was analyzed, demonstrating a stronger effect (B = 1.808, p = 0.023, OR = 6.097), further confirming its importance. These results consistently highlight that a higher comprehension level significantly increases the likelihood of better eating behavior in children, whereas Last Education and Child's Age do not play significant roles. Thus, Comprehension Level emerges as the most influential factor in shaping eating behavior among children aged 6–59 months.

DISCUSSION

This study affirms the critical role of maternal nutritional comprehension in shaping toddler feeding behavior, particularly within the socio-cultural context of Tulungagung Regency. Mothers with good comprehension were found to be 6.097 times more likely to engage in appropriate feeding behavior compared to those with only sufficient understanding. This statistically significant association (p = 0.013) is consistent with prior findings, highlighting that comprehension about nutrients and food choices directly influences maternal decision-making in terms of food type, amount, and frequency (Rezaeizadeh et al., 2024; Sindri et al., 2024).

The strong connection between nutritional comprehension and feeding behavior underscores the importance of context-specific health literacy as a determinant of child nutrition. While formal education is often viewed as a proxy for comprehension, this study's multivariate analysis revealed no significant association between maternal education and feeding behavior (p > 0.05). This finding suggests that formal education alone may not be sufficient to ensure optimal feeding practices. Instead, practical nutritional literacy, potentially gained through community health posts (Posyandu), health workers, or social learning, plays a more critical role in influencing feeding behavior. This insight echoes findings from (Fitriani et al., 2024; Purwaningsih & Rofiqoch, 2024), emphasizing the need for targeted maternal nutrition education rather than generalized academic instruction.

Nutritional Comprehension is Comprehension about food and the nutrients contained in food. A mother's Comprehension about nutrition influences her behavior and attitude when choosing food for toddlers (Sindri et al., 2024). This includes decisions about the amount, type, and frequency of food consumption. Mothers with a better understanding of nutrition are more likely to provide adequate nutrition for their children, which can improve nutritional status (Marbun et al., 2024; Purwaningsih & Rofiqoch, 2024). Improving mothers' knowledge of nutrition and feeding patterns can be a key intervention in addressing malnutrition in toddlers in Indonesia (Sefty et al., 2022).

In this study, it was proven that there is a relationship between comprehension level and feeding behavior in toddlers in Tulungagung Regency. The result of the bivariate analysis in Table 4 indicates a significant relationship between comprehension level and feeding behavior in toddlers (p=0.013). Specifically, mothers with good comprehension were 6.097 times more likely to exhibit good feeding behaviors compared to toddlers of mothers with sufficient comprehension. Mothers with higher comprehension levels may have a better understanding of optimal feeding practices, enabling them to create more supportive feeding environments (Rezaeizadeh et al., 2024). In contrast, those with lower comprehension may struggle to implement appropriate strategies, potentially leading to suboptimal feeding behaviors. As found in the study from Bayongbong, children with less food intake are 6.231 times more likely to experience malnutrition compared to those with good food intake (Fitriani et al., 2024).

Therefore, nutritional status can be influenced by feeding behavior in toddlers because comprehension is important in shaping behavior (Pangaribuan & Marliani, 2020).

Most of the mothers of toddlers in Tulungagung Regency have good comprehension. This aligns with findings emphasizing that the nutritional status of children under five years old is influenced by their food intake and maternal feeding behavior (Sari et al., 2024). Parents' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors significantly influence a child's eating habits (Marlina et al., 2020). In line with this, research conducted in East Nusa Tenggara Province found that maternal behavior regarding good nutrition and good eating culture are closely related and can reduce the chances of nutritional problems in toddlers in stunting locus areas (Picauly, 2024).

Parenting culture can be defined as a system of values and beliefs within a community that influences how parents raise their children (Andriani & Rachmawati, 2022; Sumiati, 2024). This culture is shaped by the values, knowledge, and beliefs that parents hold, which are often passed down through generations (Sumiati, 2024). Parents have a crucial role in shaping these behaviors, with their feeding behavior affecting the child's nutritional intake and overall eating habits (A'yun et al., 2024). Inappropriate parental feeding behaviors can lead to nutritional problems or unhealthy weight management in children (Fajariyanto & Ekawati, 2022).

In this study, it is proven that there is no significant relationship between parenting culture and feeding behavior in toddlers in Tulungagung Regency. Table 2 show that no statistically significant relationship between parenting culture and feeding behavior in toddlers aged 6-59 months (p=0.270). This finding contrasts with prior research, including studies indicating that parenting style significantly influences feeding behavior and that food intake in toddlers is often determined by mother. Specifically, mothers employing democratic/authoritative parenting are more likely to have children with better nutritional status. Research also has shown that children of mothers with authoritative/ideal care in warm families tend to have healthier diets, including a higher intake of fruit and vegetables (Karomah et al., 2024). In other literature, mothers who apply authoritarian parenting put more pressure on their children in certain circumstances. For example, when their children are underweight because they are worried about this, the mothers put more pressure on their children to eat. So, they accidentally make children fussy and eat less (Burnett et al., 2020).

Interestingly, parenting culture did not exhibit a significant relationship with feeding behavior (p = 0.270). Although parenting culture—as a construct encompassing inherited values, beliefs, and child-rearing practices—has been reported in other studies to influence child nutrition (Karomah et al., 2024; Sumiati, 2024), the lack of association found in this study may be due to cultural homogeneity or the broad operational definition used. In rural or semi-urban settings such as Tulungagung, parenting practices may be highly collective, often shaped more by extended family norms than by individual parental beliefs, leading to minimal variation in observable behavior. Moreover, it is possible that economic and practical constraints, such as food availability or maternal workload, override cultural ideals in day-to-day feeding practices, limiting the influence of parenting style on nutrition-related behaviors.

In multivariate analysis neither maternal education nor child's age showed significant associations with feeding behavior in any model (all p-values >0.05). The non-significance of maternal education (OR=1.584-1.671 across steps) contrasts with some previous findings (Purwaningsih & Rofiqoch, 2024), suggesting that in Tulungagung's context, practical nutritional knowledge may be more important than formal education for determining feeding practices. Similarly, the non-significant effect of child's age (OR=1.491, p=0.484) indicates that feeding behavior quality remains consistent across the 6-59 months age range in this population.

The findings also challenge assumptions that children's age significantly influences feeding behavior. With an OR of 1.491 and p = 0.484, this study found no significant variation in maternal feeding behavior across the 6–59 months age group. This implies that once feeding practices are established, they tend to remain relatively stable over the toddler period. Similar

patterns have been observed in other studies, where early maternal behaviors are maintained unless there is a disruptive factor, such as illness, economic hardship, or changes in household structure (Costa & Oliveira, 2023).

However, it's important to note several considerations. This lack of significant relationship could also be due to the influence of other factors not measured in this study. Others factors that can influence include socioeconomic characteristics, access to nutritious foods, maternal knowledge of nutrition, and the child's temperament can influence feeding practice (Costa & Oliveira, 2023). Additionally, research suggests that parents who self-reported permissive parenting style had both a direct and indirect positive impact on problematic mealtime behaviors, food fussiness, and emotional over-eating (Goodman et al., 2020). Thus, the absence of a direct link between parenting culture and feeding behavior in this study does not negate the broader impact of parenting on child development and nutritional outcomes.

In this study, there is a limitation. Theoretically, there are still many variables related to feeding behavior in toddlers. However, due to the limitations of the researchers, this study only examined one of the internal factors, which was the Comprehension level of the mother, and the external factor, which was the parenting culture. So, it was in accordance with the issues raised, which were related to Comprehension, parenting culture, and feeding behavior. In addition, this study also did not pay attention to mothers who had more than one toddler with adjacent ages, which might influence their parenting culture. Therefore, in this study, if mothers had more than one toddler with adjacent ages, they were considered to have a similar parenting culture even though the parenting culture may be different from one child to another.

This study's limitations should be acknowledged. Only two key predictors—maternal comprehension and parenting culture—were examined, omitting other potentially influential variables such as maternal mental health, food insecurity, dietary diversity, or fathers' involvement. Additionally, the potential bias in assuming uniform parenting culture among mothers with multiple toddlers of adjacent age must be noted. Parenting behavior may shift based on child temperament, sibling dynamics, or birth order, which were not explored in this study.

Furthermore, the absence of a significant link between parenting culture and feeding behavior does not negate the broader role of parental influences on child development. Other studies indicate that authoritarian parenting styles may inadvertently suppress appetite or provoke food refusal due to excessive pressure (Burnett et al., 2020), while permissive parenting is linked to poor food structure and overindulgence (Goodman et al., 2020). Thus, the complex interplay between parenting style, feeding context, and child outcomes warrants further exploration through mixed-method approaches and qualitative inquiry.

In summary, this study reinforces the pivotal role of maternal nutritional comprehension in shaping toddler feeding behavior and provides evidence that practical, applied nutritional knowledge may outweigh formal educational attainment in influencing everyday caregiving decisions. While parenting culture did not emerge as a significant factor in this sample, it remains a valuable lens for understanding family-level influences on child nutrition. These findings support the development of targeted maternal nutrition education programs and culturally sensitive behavior change strategies to improve feeding practices and address child malnutrition in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

The mother's comprehension level is related to the feeding behavior of toddlers. This is because mothers play an important role in selecting food intake for children. Mothers who have good comprehension tend to pay attention to the most appropriate method of feeding their children, so the child's nutritional needs will be fulfilled. Most mothers of toddlers applied an ideal parenting culture but adequate feeding behavior. Thus, the parenting culture in this study

did not obtain results related to feeding behavior in toddlers. This is in contrast to previous research because most studies found that there was a relationship between parenting culture and feeding behavior. Mothers who apply ideal parenting tend to have good feeding behavior. Future researchers can conduct research on internal factors and external factors related to other feeding behavior such as emotions, motivation, and socio-economics. Suggestions for researchers further should pay attention to the parenting culture of mothers who have more than one toddler with an adjacent age. Future researchers may use the CFQ (Child Feeding Questionnaire) directly because it has been proven to be widely used by previous researchers to assess parenting patterns of feeding children.

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