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Vegan Parents' Approaches to the Nutrition of Children Aged 0-6 Years in Türkiye: In-Depth Interview Study

Türkiye'de Vegan Ebeveynlerin 0-6 Yaş Arası Çocuklarının Beslenmesine Yaklaşımları: Derinlemesine Görüşme Çalışması

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This study was presented as an oral presentation at the KOSTU International Holistic Health Approach Congress, May 24-24, 2024, Kocaeli, Türkiye.

ABSTRACT Objective: The aim of this study was to understand the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of vegan parents regarding the nutrition of their children. **Material and Methods:** Twenty vegan parents (19 mothers, 1 father) aged 30-48 participated in this qualitative study conducted between January-February 2024. Transcripts were created after in-depth interviews. The 6 stages of the thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke were used in the study and the themes were determined in the MAXQDA24 software. **Results:** Participant statements were presented under 7 themes. It was determined that parents preferred vegan nutrition due to its positive effects on human health (f=6) and animal rights (f=12). However, they face challenges such as social prejudice, lack of vegan options in schools, and availability of alternative foods. Although all parents reported that they breastfed their babies for some time, some breastfed for less than 24 months. During the complementary feeding period, 40% of the interviewed parents applied a vegan diet to their children. Two out of three parents believe that a vegan diet does not pose any risk to their children's health. In addition, some participants mentioned a lack of resources regarding vegan nutrition for children. **Conclusion:** The results show that vegan individuals have different approaches to the nutrition of their children, and need nutritional counseling and scientific platforms to provide an adequate and balanced diet for their children.

Keywords: Pediatrics; qualitative research; diet; vegan; parents

ÖZET Amaç: Bu çalışmanın amacı, vegan ebeveynlerin çocuklarının beslenmesine ilişkin tutumlarını, davranışlarını ve deneyimlerini anlamaktır. **Gereç ve Yöntemler:** Ocak-Şubat 2024 tarihleri arasında yürütülen bu niteliksel çalışmaya 30-48 yaş arasındaki 20 vegan ebeveyn (19 anne, 1 baba) katılmıştır. Derinlemesine görüşmelerden sonra transkriptler oluşturulmuştur. Çalışmada Braun ve Clarke'ın tematik analiz yaklaşımının 6 aşaması kullanılmış ve temalar MAXQDA24 yazılımında belirlenmiştir. **Bulgular:** Katılımcı ifadeleri 7 tema altında sunulmuştur. Ebeveynlerin vegan beslenmeyi hayvan hakları (f=12) ve insan sağlığı üzerindeki olumlu etkileri (f=6) nedeniyle tercih ettikleri belirlenmiştir. Ancak, sosyal önyargı, kreşlerde vegan beslenme seçeneklerinin eksikliği ve alternatif yiyeceklerin ulaşılabilirliği gibi zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadırlar. Tüm ebeveynler bebeklerini bir süre emzirdiklerini belirtseler de, bazıları 24 aydan az süreyle emzirmiştir. Tamamlayıcı beslenme döneminde, görüşülen ebeveynlerin %40'ı çocuklarına vegan diyet uygulamıştır. Her üç ebeveynden ikisi vegan diyetin çocuklarının sağlığı için herhangi bir risk oluşturmayacağına inanmaktadır. Ayrıca, bazı katılımcılar çocuklar için vegan beslenmeyle ilgili kaynak eksikliğinden bahsetmiştir. **Sonuç:** Sonuçlar, vegan bireylerin çocuklarının beslenmesine yönelik farklı yaklaşımlara sahip olduğunu ve çocukları için yeterli ve dengeli bir beslenme sağlamak için beslenme danışmanlığına ve bilimsel platformlara ihtiyaç duyduklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pediatri; niteleyici araştırma; diyet; vegan; ebeveynler

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The number of individuals following alternative nutritional models, such as vegan or vegetarian diets, has been increasing in recent years. Data from the last decade show that the number of adult vegans in some countries has increased by approximately 350%.[1] International organizations report conflicting views regarding the safety of vegan diets in early childhood, emphasizing both potential adequacy under strict supervision and serious risks when recommendations are not followed.[2,3]

There are an increasing number of studies comparing nutrient intake or health risks in children on omnivorous diets with those following different models of vegetarianism. In a cross-sectional study, food intakes and serum biomarkers of children on omnivorous and vegan diets were compared. All vegan participants had vitamin A insufficiency and borderline vitamin D levels. Serum total cholesterol, high density lipoprotein (HDL), and low density lipoprotein (LDL), essential amino acids, and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) levels were also significantly lower.[4] In the Vegetarian and Vegan Children Study (VeChi Diet Study) conducted in Germany, the nutritional intake (energy and macronutrient) and anthropometric characteristics of 430 vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous children aged 0-3 were compared. The children's energy intake and anthropometric characteristics were found to be similar.[5] In the VeChi Diet Study, micronutrient and fatty acid intake levels of vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous children were compared. The results show that in early childhood, critical nutrients such as vitamin D, iodine, and DHA should be given special importance in all children, regardless of their nutritional model. In addition to these, vitamin B_2, vitamin B_{12}, calcium, and iron should be emphasized for vegan and vegetarian children.[6] A study that included the results of 45 studies conducted on children who were fed flexitarian, lacto-ovo-vegetarian, lacto-vegetarian, pescatarian, vegan, and macrobiotic diets reported that the more restrictive the diet and the younger the child, the higher the risk of nutrient deficiencies.[7] In another study conducted to compare the body composition, cardiovascular risk status, and micronutrient levels of vegetarian and omnivorous children, compared to omnivores, vegetarians had lower bone mineral content, total cholesterol, HDL, serum B_{12}, and 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels, as well as higher glucose, very LDL, and triglyceride levels. Vegans were shorter in height and had lower bone mineral content, total LDL, HDL, iron, serum B_{12}, and 25-hydroxyvitamin D level.[8] Similar results were found in a metaanalysis that aimed to evaluate the health consequences of a vegan diet in children and adolescents.[9]

Although many quantitative studies examine the nutritional and health status of vegans, qualitative data on how vegan parents approach their children's nutrition is quite limited. Exploring and understanding the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of vegan parents on this issue is important for improving the quality of healthcare provided. Our study aims to examine the answer to the following research question: *What are the attitudes and behaviors of vegan parents towards the nutrition of their children aged 0-6?*

MATERIAL AND METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

Qualitative research is a study that includes findings that are not obtained from any quantitative procedure.[10] This study examines the approaches of vegan parents towards their children's nutrition using qualitative methods.

Participants

In order to ensure easy accessibility, participants were selected from adults who attended the 6th International İstanbul VEGFEST (2023) event organized by the Turkish Vegan Association in İstanbul. Some characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. All participants reside in urban areas in İstanbul and have at least a high school education level. Inclusion criteria were as follows: being ≥18 years of age, at least one of the parents being vegan, having a child aged ≤6 years, no nutrition-related health problems, having an active internet connection and a means of communication.

Procedure

Ethics committee approval for the study was obtained from the İstinye University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee on December 25,

2023 (no: 2023/11/107). Individuals who declared that they were vegan informed about the study, and consent forms were obtained from volunteers. All processes were carried out in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. To test the semi-structured questions in the topic guide, the first 2 interviews were conducted as a pilot study, and the questions were directed to the participants without any changes in the subsequent interviews. The interviews, conducted between January-February 2024, continued until data saturation was reached; the study was completed with 20 participants. Data saturation was systematically monitored according to the emergence of new themes and original opinions. The interviews were conducted online via video calls and lasted between 20-45 minutes. A form was filled out before the interviews, which included the participants' age, gender, marital status, education status, occupation, and the age of their child. The interviews conducted using a topic guide consisting of nine semi-structured questions prepared by the researchers after reviewing the literature (Table 2). At the end of the interviews,

TABLE 1: Some information about parents and their youngest children

Participant	Parent	Age (years)	Marital status	Occupation	The age of the youngest child (years)
P 1	Mother	38	Married	Fashion designer	1
P 2	Mother	37	Married	Drama instructor	3.5
P 3	Mother	33	Married	Computer programmer	5
P 4	Mother	42	Married	Linguist	4
P 5	Mother	40	Married	Horse trainer	6
P 6	Mother	37	Married	Economist	4.5
P 7	Mother	30	Married	Nurse	1
P 8	Mother	35	Married	Food engineer	2.5
P 9	Mother	41	Married	Pilates instructor	2
P 10	Mother	33	Married	Not working	6
P 11	Mother	48	Married	Freelance	6
P 12	Mother	36	Married	Designer	1.5
P 13	Father	38	Married	Computer engineer	3
P 14	Mother	37	Married	Civil servant	1
P 15	Mother	38	Married	Academician	4
P 16	Mother	38	Married	Social media expert	3.5
P 17	Mother	38	Married	Housewife	2
P 18	Mother	35	Married	Teacher	3
P 19	Mother	33	Married	Not working	6
P 20	Mother	35	Married	Doctor	4

P: Participant

TABLE 2: Semi-structured questions

Questions
1. Can you tell us about the importance of a vegan diet and what it means to you
2. What do you think about the variety of foods consumed as alternatives to animal-based foods?
3. Do you have difficulty accessing alternative foods? If so, can you explain?
4. Did you breastfeed your child? (If breastfed: for how long?/If not breastfed: what is the reason?)
5. Can you explain what kind of a nutritional approach you applied during your child's solid food period?
6. Are there any challenging aspects of a vegan diet for you and your child? If so, what are they?
7. What are your views on the applicability of a vegan diet in the nutrition of children aged 0-6?
8. Have you offered your child the right to choose their diet/will you offer it in the future?
9. What do you think about the possible effects of a vegan diet on children's health? Do you have any concerns about this issue?

all audio recordings were reviewed by researchers and transcribed into written form. Participants were assigned numbers (P1, etc.) to ensure anonymity. In order to prevent researcher bias during the interview and coding process, precautions were taken such as non-leading questions, recording of all statements in the audio recordings completely, and creation of themes by 2 separate groups of researchers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcripts were analyzed using the MAXQDA24 (VERBI Software GmbH, Berlin, Germany) package program with a thematic analysis method. The 6-stage model suggested by Braun and Clarke for thematic analysis [recognizing the data (1), creating initial codes (2), searching for themes (3), examining potential themes (4), defining and naming themes (5), and reporting (6)] was used as a guide.[11] Based on the participants' answers to the interview questions, draft themes and sub-themes were determined separately by two researcher groups (EG&ZK and NZS&DK). Afterwards, the researchers came together to create the final versions of the themes and sub-themes. The frequency values of the participants' responses that could be included in the themes and sub-themes were recorded and reported.

A word cloud analysis was conducted to determine the words that participants repeated most frequently in the interviews. Before the analysis, the researcher removed questions from the transcripts, conversational words at the beginning and end of the interviews (e.g., hello, thanks), words consisting of fewer than 3 letters, pronouns, and conjunctions. Punctuation marks and numbers were also removed from the text. Then, a word cloud was created with the 50 most frequently repeated words in the interviews.

RESULTS

The seven themes and their frequencies obtained from the thematic analysis of qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with vegan parents about their children's nutrition are schematized in Figure 1.

The word cloud analysis based on the parents' statements shows that the word "vegan" is the most frequently repeated word in the interviews, followed by "animal, baby, child, school, product, doctor, food, eat, difficult" (Figure 2).

THEME 1: THE MEANING OF VEGANISM

This theme encompasses the meanings of vegan nutrition for individuals. Participant statements were shaped around the subthemes *of animal rights, human health, and veganism in the future.*

Animal Rights

The vast majority of participants approached the issue from an animal rights perspective (f=12). It can be said that the belief that animals' right to life should

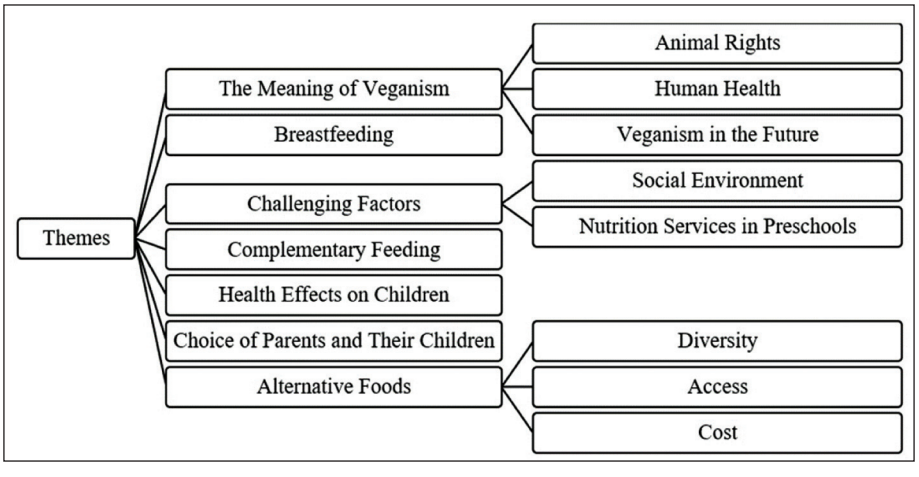


FIGURE 1: Themes and subthemes

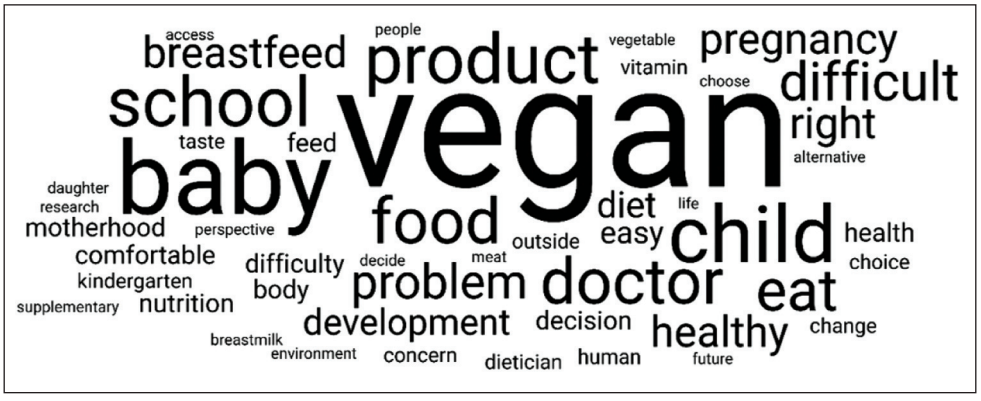


FIGURE 2: The word cloud

not be taken away and that animals should not be harmed for human purposes influences some participants' vegan diet preferences.

"They are no different from us. I don't want something to be done to them that I don't want done to me." (P11)

Human Health

Another point emphasized regarding the meaning of vegan nutrition is its positive effects on human health (f=6).

"Vegan nutrition has become a lifestyle for me now. I can say that this is my way of protecting my health; I protect my health and therefore the health of my family." (P20)

Veganism in the Future

Individuals believe that vegan nutrition is an area open to development regarding social awareness. There are also ideas that prejudice against veganism will decrease in the future and that the number of vegans will increase (f=7). However, it is emphasized that studies should be conducted to eliminate the lack of knowledge in society about vegan nutrition.

"It would be nice if there were books about vegan child nutrition. In fact, there are many health workers that I follow, but there is not much content that I have seen." (P14)

"Every day, new things come out about feeding babies vegan. I try to progress by understanding those studies correctly, and I think there should be platforms where we can get more information on these issues." (P8)

THEME 2: CHALLENGING FACTORS

This theme includes findings on the challenging aspects of veganism.

Social Environment

It is evident that individuals focus on the effects of the social environment. The most basic emphasis is on the existence of prejudices towards vegan nutrition in society (f=7).

"When we first went, the doctor did not know that we were vegan, so I consciously did not tell him, to avoid any prejudice." (P1)

"We are afraid that our child will be ostracized among the other children." (P7)

Nutrition Services in Preschools

Participants stated that vegan diet-friendly menu planning was not implemented in nurseries and preschools. The lack of menu planning in these settings led parents to prepare additional lunch boxes. Parents expressed concerns about their children's nutrition, stating that this situation was challenging (f=8).

"I had a hard time finding a nursery for my child, it is very rare to find a nursery that can accommodate this, and I have to constantly prepare a lunch box, that is, while no mother looks at the list of what her child will eat today when sending him/her off, we have to." (P8)

Another parent indicated that after her child started kindergarten, he/she stopped eating vegan and did not continue previous eating habits.

"My child started kindergarten at 13 months and began refusing the vegetables he/she used to eat. I don't know how a 13-month-old could form an opinion, but our routine was disrupted." (P4)

THEME 3: ALTERNATIVE FOODS

This theme includes the participants' views on alternative foods to animal-based products, with 3 subthemes titled diversity, access, and cost.

Diversity

Some participants believe that there are not many alternative options, and that development is needed (f=7), while others stated that significant progress has been made compared to previous years and that options have increased (f=13).

"It is not enough, but it is manageable with online shopping. There are many varieties of vegan meatballs, döner, and cheese, but on the other hand, they are all processed foods. I think it could be improved a bit more at the moment, but I can say that we can manage." (P6)

"I think it is progressing very well. There is a lot of variety." (P16)

Access

Some participants mentioned that the options have increased compared to previous years and that they can access vegan products more easily (f=7).

"When I first started eating vegan, none of these were available. Now they are available." (P4)

Cost

Some participants expressed their views on the high cost of a vegan diet as follows (f=2):

"I may sometimes have difficulty with some of the cheeses I like, namely vegan cheeses." (P16)

THEME 4: BREASTFEEDING

All participants stated that they breastfed their children for a while (f=20), but the duration of breastfeeding varies.

"I breastfed my child until he/she was one year old because I thought breast milk was very beneficial." (P7)

"I breastfed him/her for about 9 months. He/she was a very healthy baby, a baby who was fed well." (P2)

THEME 5: COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING

Parents described their experiences during the transition to complementary feeding. During this process, some parents stated that they fed their children vegan (f=8), received dietitian support (f=3), made decisions according to the child's rhythm, and sometimes gave their children animal foods (f=9).

"I was feeding my child vegan, and to be honest, it was not difficult. You are already feeding your child healthy things, and when you say health, plant-based products come to mind." (P15)

"When we started using complementary food, we had no difficulty. At that time, I had already consulted a vegan dietitian." (P4)

"We started the complementary feeding period from the sixth month. I did not feed my baby vegan; I also gave him/her animal products to support his/her growth." (P7)

THEME 6: CHOICE OF PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

The vast majority of parents stated that they support their children in making their own decisions about their nutrition. Some parents indicated that they feed their children according to their own nutritional habits, but they can also eat animal products if they want (f=12).

"We started vegetarian; let's see. He/she can eat animal products if he/she wants. When he/she grows up, he/she can decide for himself/herself." (P17)

Some parents reported that they had made their own interventions to help their children adopt a vegan diet (f=8).

"I made my baby discover foods with the Baby-Led Nutrition Method. We discovered vegan foods as much as we could." (P20)

One parent stated that he/she was initially hesitant about whether his/her child would be vegan but later found the vegan diet feasible and had no regrets about it.

"I had a hard time deciding whether I should raise him/her on this diet; but I have never regretted my decision." (P19)

When examining parents' views, it is clear that they mostly intend to offer their children the right to choose. It has been determined that although some parents want their children to be vegan, they do not pressure them in this regard, while others do not prefer animal products.

THEME 7: HEALTH EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

Parents' views on the possible effects of a vegan diet on children's health were examined. While some parents stated that they were not concerned about vegan nutrition (f=13), others expressed concern about whether their children were getting enough nutrition (f=7).

"They were always ahead in terms of their children's development, in terms of health checks and so on. That's why I feel very comfortable about vegan nutrition." (P5)

"Yes, when it comes to children, anxiety is inevitable. I am quite skeptical about implementing a vegan diet for children." (P7)

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examines the attitudes and behaviors of vegan parents towards their children's nutrition. Detailed opinions were obtained on topics such as the meaning parents attribute to veganism, obstacles to vegan nutrition, preference for breastfeeding, complementary feeding practices, thoughts about giving children the right to choose in the future, and the suitability of vegan nutrition for children's health.

Veganism has increased significantly in recent years, especially in Western society.[12] Although there is no exact data on the total number of vegans in Türkiye, it is known that the rate of increase is high.[13] Previously practiced by adults to a limited extent, vegan diets have now spread to a wider audience due to motivations such as animal protection, health benefits, concerns about the use of hormones and antibiotics in animals, and environmental sustainability.[12] Similarly, the results obtained in our study show that parents prefer vegan diets due to their positive effects on animal rights and health.

There are many obstacles to maintaining a vegetarian diet, including cultural acceptability, psychological and social factors, and affordability.[14,15] In our study, some participants emphasized the existence of prejudices against vegan nutrition in society. It was noted that another challenge in vegan nutrition is the lack of menu planning specific to vegan children in nurseries. Additionally, for some individuals, the variety of alternative foods, difficulty of access, cost, taste, and nutritional content also pose challenges in vegan nutrition. Another qualitative study conducted in our country in 2020 shows that vegan individuals have common challenges such as access to vegan products and social pressure.[16]

Studies show that the feeding model applied by parents can impact a child's nutrition, and the nutritional knowledge level of parents can be an important mediator in this regard. A study showed that only 10% of vegetarian mothers fed their children vegetarian food, and parents who followed a traditional diet had lower knowledge levels than vegetarian mothers.[17] Another study showed that mothers who fed their children a lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet had the highest nutritional knowledge scores, while mothers who fed their children omnivorous and vegan diets had the lowest nutritional knowledge scores.[18] In a study examining parents' approaches to feeding their children, 360 Italian families were analyzed, and it was determined that 8.6% of the mothers applied alternative feeding models to their children. According to the study findings, 9.2% of the babies stopped breastfeeding due to being on a vegetarian or vegan diet.[19] Although all the parents who participated in our study stated that they breastfed their babies for a while, there were also babies who were breastfed for less than 24 months. During the complementary feeding period, 40% of the parents interviewed fed their children vegan. These findings support the existing evidence that parents' nutritional preferences can impact their child's nutrition.

There are a growing number of studies showing that a vegan diet may have negative health effects in children.[6-9] In our study, 2 out of every 3 parents believed that a vegan diet would not pose any risks to their child's health, while some participants expressed concerns about their child's well-being. These findings suggest that parents may not have sufficient awareness of the risks that have been clearly reported in previous studies.

A systematic review examining how a vegetarian complementary diet affects growth, neurodevelopment, and the risk of underweight, stunting, overweight, and obesity reported that the safety of a vegan/vegetarian complementary diet cannot be demonstrated. Evidence suggests that infants on a vegetarian complementary diet are at increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies and growth retardation, with significantly different outcomes in neuropsychological development and growth compared to a healthy omnivorous diet.[20] In our study, although some parents used animal-based foods or food supplements to prevent the risk of deficiency, others emphasized the adequacy of vegan nutrition during the complementary feeding period. This result indicates that some parents may not have sufficient knowledge about the nutrient content of animal foods and the risk of nutrient deficiency in vegan nutrition.

There are numerous case histories in the literature indicating that poorly planned vegan diets can lead to developmental delays, nutritional rickets, and severe developmental issues in children. The common factor in these cases is having incorrect information and distrust of medical science.[21-23] In a cross-sectional study conducted with parents of vegan children, data were collected from a total of 176 parents. Of these, 36.2% did not inform their pediatricians that they were on a vegan diet, and 70.8% perceived that pediatricians were skeptical of vegan nutrition.[24] In other study aimed at examining the experiences of vegan mothers, some mothers indicated that they did not disclose their dietary preferences to healthcare professionals due to fear of judgment.[25] In our study, only 15% of parents received nutritional counseling from a dietitian during the complementary feeding period. Moreover, many participants reported problems with social acceptance, and one participant mentioned that they did not inform their doctor about their nutritional preferences to avoid prejudice. These findings reveal the obstacles that vegan individuals face in obtaining appropriate health care for themselves and their children.

The strength of this study lies in its being the first national and one of the few international qualitative studies to investigate the attitudes and practices of vegan parents concerning their children's nutrition. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalized. Other factors that limit the generalizability of the data are that the participants were selected only from among the visitors of the 6th International Istanbul VEGFEST and individuals residing in urban areas, and the interviews were conducted online. Therefore, studies examining nutritional practices in different vegan populations are needed.

CONCLUSION

Dietary recommendations are inconsistent regarding the role of veganism in childhood nutrition. While some countries support plant-based diets among infants, children, and adolescents, others express concerns about its potential risks.[26] An increasing number of studies suggest that a restricted vegetarian diet may be associated with nutrient deficiencies and certain health risks in infancy and early childhood.[14,16-23] For a vegetarian diet to be adequate in infancy and early childhood, it is necessary to encourage the consumption of a variety of plant foods throughout the day and to be mindful of the intake of critical nutrients that are at high risk of deficiency.[27] This study examines how vegan parents approach their children's nutrition and has gathered comprehensive opinions and experiences on the subject. It aims to raise awareness among healthcare workers in the field of child nutrition about the attitudes, practices, and concerns of vegan parents regarding their children's nutrition. This awareness can positively impact the quality of health and school food services provided. The most important areas for improvement that the researchers want to emphasize are; (1) the improvement of healthcare professionals' approaches to vegan individuals, (2) the increase in quality resources on pediatric vegan nutrition, and (3) the need to make

improvements in planning special menus for individuals with different preferences in schools. Future studies could examine the experiences and views of vegan parents with different sociocultural characteristics regarding pediatric nutrition. Another area of study could be the development of interventions to improve the health and nutrition services provided to vegan individuals.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.

Authorship Contributions

***Idea/Concept:** Elif Güner; **Design:** Elif Güner; **Control/Supervision:** Elif Güner; **Data Collection and/or Processing:** Elif Güner, Zeynep Küçük, Nazlı Zeynep Sancaklı, Dilara Karaköse; **Analysis and/or Interpretation:** Elif Güner, Zeynep Küçük, Nazlı Zeynep Sancaklı, Dilara Karaköse; **Literature Review:** Elif Güner, Zeynep Küçük, Nazlı Zeynep Sancaklı, Dilara Karaköse; **Writing the Article:** Elif Güner; **Critical Review:** Elif Güner, Zeynep Küçük, Nazlı Zeynep Sancaklı, Dilara Karaköse; **References and Fundings:** Zeynep Küçük; **Materials:** Elif Güner, Zeynep Küçük, Nazlı Zeynep Sancaklı, Dilara Karaköse.*

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