



Feeding Kids Without the Fear: Picky Eating, Food Headlines, & Screens with Jennifer Anderson, MSPH, RDN of Kids Eat in Color (ep – 94)

[00:00:04] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** When we think about kids' nutrition, it's easy to focus on what they're eating, but what about the how, the where, and the when? So many eating habits begin to take shape early in life, what you enjoy, what you avoid, and what becomes part of your routine. Helping build those habits can feel like a big responsibility, and it's when so many parents and caregivers are trying to navigate in real time. Maybe you're dealing with a picky eater. Maybe you are concerned about your child's interest in ultra processed foods. If any of that sounds familiar, this episode is going to give you some really helpful perspective. Back for our second conversation, I'm joined once again by Jennifer Anderson, a registered dietitian with a master's degree in public health and the founder of Kids Eat in Color. In our last episode, we talked about how to prioritize what matters most in kids' nutrition. If you haven't listened to that one yet, definitely go back and check it out. In this episode, we are shifting our focus to how eating habits form, how feeding challenges show up, and how we can support kids in a way that's practical and flexible. Before we jump in, I want to offer a quick reminder that when we talk about behavior change, we're talking about something that takes time. And I don't just mean time for the child in your life. I also mean time for the adults involved. Sometimes that means picking your battles or it means adjusting your own language, expectations, and routines. These changes are not quick fixes, but they do require patience and compassion from everyone involved, including yourself. Okay, let's get into it. To start, I wanted Jennifer to help us understand how to spot picky eating, and when it may be something more serious, like ARFID, Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. And just a quick note, Jennifer and I use the term picky eating but we also talk in the episode about how we need to use caution with this term, especially because it risks kids feeling labeled when we use it in relation to who they are. Terms like selective eater, food learner, or even choosy eater are also used by experts and might be a better fit for you. Jennifer, welcome back.

[00:02:44] **Jennifer Anderson** Thank you so much.

[00:02:46] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** In our first episode, we talked about what matters most in kids' nutrition. But this episode is about how families can make it work as they focus on family health. So I'm interested to hear from you. What are the biggest barriers that parents face right now regarding eating right? And how do you help them manage that?

[00:03:07] **Jennifer Anderson** I think the big one right now is just the logistics. It's hard. It's hard to have kids. It's hard to have jobs. It's hard to have a few of the kids and the parents and get everybody where they're supposed to be going at the right time. It's just logistically difficult. I think the core to this is having a system. I ended up creating this thing. It's called Real Easy Weekdays. It is a meal system for families. And whatever system you're using, you just have to have it set up so that you're not having to think every day about what you're eating.

[00:03:37] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** My system is sticky notes that I put on my refrigerator, but it doesn't matter because I tell folks it's really similar. You have to have some kind of plan so that you can know the kind of food you're going to eat or have it in the house or know where you're gonna go. I just wanted to define what ages you're mostly speaking to.

[00:03:59] **Jennifer Anderson** Six months-ish through tween and teen years. Obviously in the higher teen years, that's more of adult conversations at that point, but the early teen years because the issues are the same, this situation's just more. And so this is the tools to use throughout all of the time periods.

[00:04:16] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Families are so busy. There's sports. There's activities. All of us are working. So I think having any kind of plan and a system is critical. This is really exciting to me. You are known for your work on picky eating. So I wanted to hear a little bit more about that.

[00:04:34] **Jennifer Anderson** There's not an official definition of picky eating in the research literature among professionals. So my definition of picky eating is any time a kid is not eating in some capacity and you as a parent are like, they're picky. That's really all that matters to me. Do you have a kid who is not eating what you want them to be able to eat? Now, if we get into how picky a child is, is it problematic? Is it extreme picky eating? Is it avoidant restrictive food intake disorder? Something like that. Then we're talking about something different. And I have a screener for that, the Pediatric Screener for ARFID and Extreme Picky Eating. That is an official tool that can be actually used to connect with your doctor and things like that. But if we're just talking about picky eating, we're talking your kid is not eating something that's on the table. And it's happening more often than you'd like. That's picky, it's fine. I really

don't have any worries about what you call it as long as you're not saying it in front of your child.

[00:05:32] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Ooh, tell me more about that.

[00:05:34] **Jennifer Anderson** Once kids believe that they're a picky eater and they embrace this idea, then we have to mess with their identity and the fact that they are a picky eater. And those are two different problems. And it's easier to just address one.

[00:05:47] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** So let's say that you are struggling. I'm interested in what some of the common challenges are, how you might message that to a child if at all, and what some of your baseline strategies are.

[00:05:59] **Jennifer Anderson** So if your child says, I don't eat peas. You could say, okay, you're still learning to like them. Give me the peas. I'm gonna eat them in front of you. I'm going to show you they're okay. I'm maybe even going to enjoy them. I love these peas. Thank you for sharing yours with me. Things like that where you are not giving them an out. You're not saying, oh yeah, you just don't like peas. You're saying you haven't learned to like peas yet. You're sending a child a message. You will learn to like peas one day and maybe they will, maybe they won't. I have seen adults learn to like things, so people are like, oh, well, there's things that I don't like, but hey, there is more to life yet. Ten years from now, they could be my favorite foods. I have no idea, but if I write it off and pretend it's never gonna happen, that I'm never gonna try them, I'm not gonna learn to like them, I'm gonna have the exposure. So we really have to take a different mentality of like, hey, we can learn to just about anything. We can learn so many more things than we think. We have to give ourselves the exposure, we have to do that for ourselves, we have to do that for our kids. And we really cannot hold on to this mentality that we're picky. And the more that we can give kids the idea of like, oh, I'm a person who learns to like things, even if it takes them five years, it doesn't matter. Because they are, they're learning, they're getting those experiences.

[00:07:13] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I meet a lot of adults that have that identity. I have a patient about my age who has this negative affinity with Brussels sprouts because she had them boiled as a young person and she was open-minded enough to try them roasted. And she was like, this is the most incredible food I've ever had. And now she's a Brussels sprout convert. But I said, that's really brave of you to try them again, especially if you had this negative feedback from them before.

[00:07:39] **Jennifer Anderson** Right. Also kids who have something serious like an eating disorder like ARFID, Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. That is a very serious thing. It's real. They are afraid of certain foods, some of the kids, and it doesn't mean we want them to have that as our identity. Having an ARFID doesn't need to be their identity. It can be something that they deal with all the time. But it's also so important for us to say, you can learn to like it. It's gonna take some work, but you could do it. And I believe in you and be there with them and provide those opportunities because as soon as they believe it's possible, we can do amazing things when we think they're possible. But if a kid does not think that it's possible for them to eat a variety, they will not. ARFID is interesting. It has only been a diagnosis since 2013. I recently published a accredited continuing education for pediatricians about ARFID. So if you think there is something wrong with your child's eating, one, you're probably right. Two, your healthcare providers around you may not have the tools they need, but if you need to advocate for yourself, I have everything that you need to do that. You can take the PSA-Eat, which is the screener, the pediatric screener for ARFID and extreme picky eating. You take that, learn what indicators or behaviors your child has, do they have risk factors, what's the big picture, you can take that. You can bring it to your pediatrician. You can say, look, this is what we have. If you need to know more, here's a continuing education, but you don't have to just wait and see.

[00:09:15] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Before we continue, this episode is brought to you by Orgain. As we talk about kids' nutrition, this feels like the perfect time to share something that really may help. Orgain's lineup of kids'-nutrition protein shakes makes it easier to enjoy protein in a way that's both convenient and delicious. They offer both plant-based and dairy-based shakes, which are quick to grab. And if you want to boost a recipe your kids already love, Orgain's Kids Nutrition Shake Powder can be a great addition to oatmeal, smoothies, or even pancakes. These offer eight grams of protein, three to four grams of fiber, and 22 to 23 vitamins and minerals per serving. So if you're looking for nutrition your kids will enjoy, find it at Orgain.com. This conversation feels especially important because it reminds us just how easy it is to oversimplify what's really going on with a child's eating. What looks like picky eating may actually be part of typical development or it might point to something more. And part of the work here is learning not to jump too quickly into conclusions, labels or frustration, but instead stay curious, pay attention. And ask what kind of support is needed here. I also think her point about language is such an important one. Once a child starts to believe that something is simply part of who they are, it can become harder to move beyond that label. And maybe that's one of the biggest takeaways from this part of the conversation. Relationship with food matters just as much as the food itself. We need less shame, less labeling, and more support. So where do we go from here? When it comes to kids' nutrition,

ultra-processed foods are always a hot topic. But Jennifer would prefer we focus on something a little different, hyperpalatable foods. And that distinction matters. So let's get into it. I think that the conversation around picky eating is even harder these days. Tell me if this is correct, because why would a kid wanna eat healthy fruits and veggies when they have these other hyperpalatable foods? Chips, for example, that might be cheesy and savory and salty. Is that part of what you're seeing as the problem?

[00:11:49] **Jennifer Anderson** Absolutely. I have a very strong dedication to approaching food factually, neutrally. It's our moral issue. If you give your child cheesy, crunchy, whatever. Every food is different. They're gonna do something different in your body. They have different things in them. So how much what your child is eating is gonna matter. It just is. At the same time, what they eat is not gonna make them a good or a bad person. So. If we want kids to have healthy bodies and also have a good relationship with their body and a good with food so that they're not feeling guilt, shame, fear about what they're eating, that's not healthy. So if we want them to be all around healthy, then we want the physically healthy, we want that mentally healthy with their bodies and that is what I call embodied independence. Where we really want to teach kids what they need to be healthy and give them the information that they need, but we also want them to be in their body, living their best life, able to enjoy food, able to really engage with all these things. And when we have both of those, we can have a healthy kid. And so that is always what I like to say before we start talking about, quote, hyperpalatable foods. Processed food is a trendy term. Ultra-processed food as a trendy terms. So rather than talk about that, I like to focus on what we actually should be caring about. And those are the foods that are so delicious that kids will eat more of them than is healthy for them. And these are those foods called hyperpalatable. Palatable means, hey, I love to eat it. Hyper means extra good, extra tasty, that chip, that candy. Some kids are gonna be good at listening to their body and just responding to it. Other kids are going to have an even greater reward reaction in their brain because of their neurochemistry, and they are not going to have any defenses against hyperpalatable foods. So we do need to be aware because these foods can easily crowd out other foods and they can contribute to picky eating. And so if kids have a lot of exposure to that, especially for those kids who have like a bigger reaction to hyperpalatable foods, boring foods are just gonna be even more boring. And so, if you're really struggling with picky eating, reducing those hyperpalatable foods as much as possible, like, actually be the key to seeing all lot of success with eating.

[00:14:15] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Part of the challenge in this space is that kids are also getting really strong messages about food. So there's some interesting both marketing going on and messaging from other kids, from parents at school, in

the media. How do you handle information, misinformation, and even fear around food right now?

[00:14:41] **Jennifer Anderson** We need to take a step back first. If you see something and it makes you feel afraid, pause. I like to ask questions. Is it sensational? Because if it is, then we gotta keep moving because a reliable person is not gonna be sensational. They are gonna give you some nuance. They're gonna be calm and confident about this. They're not gonna be sensational. Is it something that is relevant to your family? Do you actually eat this food enough? Like, oh my gosh, I just read this headline about chocolate. Okay, well how much is your child eat chocolate? Well, once a week. Okay, this doesn't apply to you. Let's say you really believe the source, and your kid does eat a lot of it. If you take that food out of their diet, what are you going to replace it with? So if you just read that sweet potatoes contain heavy metals, because yeah, they do because anything goes in the ground does. Oh my gosh, I got to get sweet potatoes out of your diet. Okay, what food are you going to put back in that has the vitamin A content of those sweet potatoes? And will your kid actually eat that food? Because if they won't, having a kid who's deficient in vitamin A is going to be a lot worse than having a kid who got some heavy metals from sweet potatoes. Now, if it's something like, oh, I just read about BPA and boxed mac and cheese. Okay, there are so many foods that have wheat and dairy and those sorts of things in them. You can probably find a substitute without much effort. Another question, do you have the time, money, and energy to avoid these ingredients? Because if you don't, just keep going. If you can't care about this, you can care about it. So just don't feel guilty about it, don't worry about it just let it go. And then also put it in the context, is my child already doing okay when it comes to the bigger picture, when it comes to health impact tiers, comes to all the other ones, because I guarantee you most headlines are from that sixth tier of things that are sensational, they're hot topics, they're new things, they're things that have emerging evidence, but not always that much, sometimes none. Is your kid winning on the big things? If so, okay. But if the answer to any of those five questions is no, then it's time to move on, and to just say, this is not applicable to me and my family at this time.

[00:17:16] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I love your messaging around letting go of guilt and fear for both parents and also for kids, because I see a lot of people struggling with that right now, and it does not lead to happiness. I'd be interested in your take on screens and distraction when eating with kids.

[00:17:37] **Jennifer Anderson** Yeah, when we think about distraction. What happens when a kid is distracted in eating is they're not as able to listen to their body. So if I'm eating and working, am I really tasting a lot of my lunch? Eh, kind of. But what I'm really doing is I'm working, and I'm trying to at least eat,

right? The same with kids. They're not going to have the same experience of taste, touch, smell, you know, all those sensory inputs that they're going to need to get their body used to it. And they also aren't gonna get some of those other benefits of meal time watching other people eat if they're eating with other people. One of the things we forget is the two most powerful ways to get kids eating more food is to feed them the food. So just to exposures, like constantly feeding so it's not new, it's just there. And then the other one is to watch somebody else eating it. So modeling, that's right up there with some of the most powerful picky eating stuff you can ever do. And so when kids are watching the screen, they're not doing those things.

[00:18:37] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Something that I have a personal passion about, dietary supplements. How do you help people think about anything from big picture like a overall multivitamin down to your kid needs more iron or vitamin D specifically?

[00:18:51] **Jennifer Anderson** We want to look at, think about supplements in three ways. They're either used to prevent a deficiency to solve a deficiency or they are used in a therapeutic way to address some sort of health issue. And so if you're using supplements to prevent something, that usually falls into the category of multivitamins. For instance, like, oh, I don't know, it seems like I've heard enough that tells me that they should all be eating a multivitamin. The only way to really know if your child needs a multivitamin is to take a week and track what they eat, measure the nutrients that they get and compare that to the recommended nutrient intakes. That's really how you would do that. If you wanna give your child a multivitamin, in most cases, it's probably gonna be fine, but I always recommend, if nothing else, contacting your child's medical provider and saying, is there a reason a multivitamin would be dangerous for my child to take? That is a really important question. Now, if your child has a deficiency, you can go to your healthcare provider and say, I really want them tested. I think something is weird here. Or look at their intake. This doesn't look right. Can we please screen them for some vitamin deficiencies? If that's the case, then you might need to use a supplement to solve the deficiency. And in that case, then you really wanna work with the healthcare provider closely, because the amounts needed to resolve deficiencies are often dangerous if taken for a long time. And then if your child has a condition and you are trying to treat that condition with supplements as a therapeutic form of treatment, got to work with a health professional.

[00:20:29] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** For safety, this isn't something that the average person should be trying to manage on their own. There could be testing involved, there could be medication interactions. This is something that you really need an expert on. As we wrap up, I'd love to hear from you. What is one

message that you hope parents listening remember about creating a healthier relationship with food at home?

[00:20:51] **Jennifer Anderson** Thing is for parents to remember that they're doing a good job. Because yeah, everybody's telling us we're doing things wrong. When you look at the big picture, you realize you're doing A LOT of things right. And when you can focus on that, you can actually feel confident. You can feel accomplished. And that comes through in so many different ways. Because when we actually own it, instead of feeling bad and weighed down and guilty and are afraid by all these headlines we're reading. We say, I'm not gonna be part of that anymore. Instead, I'm gonna focus on my wins, then suddenly I have more energy, and I can use that energy to add some more veggies to the table or do something fun with the kids or turn off the TV or eat with them. As much as we think sometimes feeding kids means focusing on the nutrition, unless we're feeling some semblance of confidence in ourselves, it's gonna be hard for us to keep giving and helping our kids, and so we really need to own our confidence in this role.

[00:21:56] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** In our first episode with Jennifer, we spent a lot of time talking about frameworks and how helpful they can be. This conversation feels a little different, but I actually think it's leading us to a similar place because sometimes support looks like having a framework and sometimes it looks like paying close attention and staying flexible. And really both of these episodes come back to the same message. There is no one perfect formula, and that is actually thoughtful caregiving. This episode continues to emphasize that what we're really building is a kind of confidence that helps you create thoughtful choices for you and your family. And when you do that, I have no doubt that the lessons you pass on to the kids in your life are going to be meaningful ones. I'm Dr. Ginger Hultin. Thank you for listening to this episode of The Good Clean Nutrition podcast. If this conversation resonated with you, please leave us a review and let us know what stood out the most.

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