



Kids' Nutrition: What Actually Matters Most with Jennifer Anderson, MSPH, RDN of Kids Eat in Color (ep – 93)

[00:00:04] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** When it comes to nutrition for the kids in our lives, there is so much information out there. The do's, the don'ts, and the strong opinions. Whether it's online or coming from the people in your everyday life, this all creates the question, how do we help little ones eat, grow, and thrive? Today, I am joined by Jennifer Anderson, who some of you know as Kids Eat in Color. A registered dietitian with a master's degree in public health, Jennifer has created an incredible body of work around children's nutrition. She is the perfect person for this conversation, especially because so much of her recent work has focused on helping caregivers understand what kids need most when it comes to nutrition. My hope is that by the end of this episode, you have all the tools you need to help sort through the next nutrition message that comes your way. As we begin this conversation, one of the main themes is learning to zoom out, and I mean really zoom out. When it comes to the wellbeing of the people we love, it's so easy to get caught up in the tiny details. And while that definitely comes from a good place, it's not always helpful. I also want to note that this episode is about understanding and applying a framework. So if you're someone who prefers a very clear list of do's and don'ts, parts of this might feel like a different approach. But I encourage you to stick with us because the beauty of a framework is that it's repeatable, flexible, and customizable. To kick things off with Jennifer, we are diving into her Health Impact Tiers framework. Starting with the basics. We are about to cover everything from energy and food safety to allergies, sleep and protein. So don't go anywhere. Jennifer, welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited that you're here. For so many parents and supervisors and guardians, the first question they have is, where do I even start? And you have created a framework called the Health Impact Tiers to help answer that exact question. So I'd love to kick off by just having you walk us through the tiers and talk about why they're useful.

[00:02:30] **Jennifer Anderson** I think there's so much nutrition information out there right now that it can be completely overwhelming to know where to start. When we think about health impact, we're thinking, what's the one thing that I

could do for my child that is going to have the biggest impact on their health overall? It doesn't mean that only some things are important. Everything is important, but some things have a much broader impact than others. For example, energy. That is tier one. We want to make sure our kids are surviving. So this is like a survival tier, making sure we have enough food. If your child doesn't have enough food. I don't care what micronutrients they have or don't have. It truly doesn't matter. So we always want to make sure whether our kid is kind of a typical eater, they eat a variety of foods, want to make sure they're getting food. We want to make sure if we're struggling with food resources, that we are taking advantage of every option available to us. And if we have a kid who's extremely picky to the point that they're skipping meals or not eating. We wanna make sure we are giving them whatever they need to be able to get enough energy. So that is kind of where I would start, and people are like, that's so obvious. Sometimes it is, sometimes it's not, but that is for sure the top one is making sure our kids are gonna have enough energy, making sure we're getting rid of those choking hazards, making sure that if they have an allergy or something like that, we are attending to it and we are protecting them.

[00:03:54] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I think that simplifies things so much, and that's what tier one is all about. I hope that is really grounding for people to be like, do this thing, focus here, that's where we start. What other tiers do you have?

[00:04:07] **Jennifer Anderson** So tier two, I think, is where a lot of parents say, okay, I'm giving my kid enough food, so now what? Well, we wanna make sure they're getting enough protein. And the reason is because proteins are gonna break down in all sorts of little chemicals that are gonna go throughout the body and they are involved in absolutely everything. So we wanna to make sure kids are getting enough protein. Sometimes you think, well, I gotta start giving them like protein bars and stuff. No, kids are probably needing a lot less protein, you think. A toddler might need 13 to 16 grams. It all depends on their size, their activity level, all of that. But we're talking about probably less than 20 grams of protein your toddler needs. Obviously as kids get bigger, they're gonna need more. But often we have it in our minds, protein shake amounts of protein. That's not what kids need. They need a couple of glasses of milk, a couple slices of tofu, peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a lot of peanut butter on it. And we also wanna think about kids if they are having food reactions. So if you have a kid who you know has a poor reaction to something, even if it's not an allergy, don't give it to them. Maybe it is food dyes, because you're like, oh my gosh, I know. As I talk to parents, the parents who know their kid has a reaction, they know. If that's your child, then absolutely. We're talking tier two. That's gonna have a huge impact on your child. Maybe it's a specific sort of food. When they eat, their tongue is tingling, then no. So we wanna be paying attention to our

child. How are they reacting to food? And if there's something obvious, then we wanna take care of it at that time.

[00:05:40] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It's not like a question. Are they having this issue? We're doing elimination, that kind of thing. We're talking about the big picture macronutrients, which are fats, carb, protein, and maybe some very obvious reactions within those.

[00:05:52] **Jennifer Anderson** You don't have to be doing any experimenting. And although it doesn't sound very nutrition related, enough sleep and enough physical activity are also super important. And if we're focused on something like, should they really be eating this meat or that sort of meat or this or that or the other thing, and our kid is not moving at all, then we're really missing a bigger impacting.

[00:06:18] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** People get confused sometimes about how much I talk about physical activity or how much I focus on sleep. It's because it has overlapping effects with nutrition. It's critically important so much that I can't pull them apart. It has to be part of the foundation. So Jennifer, I'd love to hear more about tier three.

[00:06:37] **Jennifer Anderson** So when we're thinking about tier three, my kid is going to be okay. But there's also a lot of other things at this point that are gonna have a really broad impact on their health. So now we're starting to talk about the water that our kids are drinking, fiber. We're talking about fat. And we're also talking about some things to avoid, some things that are perhaps a little more serious. Protein gets all the press. And I do consider it to be a tier two ingredient because we don't ever want a kid who's protein deficient. Fiber, however, needs a PR team because it is not talked about enough, and 95 percent of kids are deficient in it. They're not eating enough. Constipation is just so common among kids. And so we gotta get kids eating more fiber. It's not just about preventing constipation. Also, all those different fibers. And that boost our immune system, that affects our mental health, it literally affects every single part of your body. So if we can build up enough fiber, suddenly we are having a very broad impact on health. And that is gonna affect the other tiers down below it. We can get a huge bang for our buck by focusing on fiber. And the things that I generally kind of say, okay, what do we really wanna think about in terms of avoiding at this level that's gonna have a really broad impact? I think about high heavy metal fish. So like tuna, and you could find a list of high heavy middle fish, high mercury fish. We wanna avoid that, especially for those little kids. We wanna think about reducing processed meats. We wanna think about not feeding babies processed rice products. And the reason for that is the processed rice products can contain a lot of heavy metals. Rice itself is

absolutely fine. You can absolutely so that's your family and your baby and all that, it's these processed snacks and there's so many alternatives that are not made with rice that it's a really easy switch to find those alternative foods. And then the last one I like to bring up is let's reduce sugar sweetened beverages as much as we possibly can. A sugar sweet and beverage is literally any drink that there is that has added sugar to it and that could be in various forms. But generally we're thinking flavored milks, chocolate milk. We're thinking soda, Kool-Aid type drinks. We're even thinking, especially for little kids, we're also thinking about full strength juice. That is not considered a sugar sweet beverage. So I wanna be clear about that. And juice definitely has different things and situations where it's really useful. But especially with little kids like they're getting used to that hyper sweet flavor. Now there are some times where it will be appropriate. So we never say never, but we want to keep the kids away from soda and sugar drinks and all that stuff as long as we possibly can. And then when they do start drinking them, reduce them as much as we can. People are also like, is this milk alternative, oat milk or an almond milk that has some sugar added? I think we're getting into the weights there. If your kid can't drink cow's milk and you're giving them a milk alternative and it has some added sugar in it to make it taste palatable. It's slightly different because milk is still gonna have the sugars in it. We're getting there, we're like way in the weeds. But in general, we want kids drinking water as their primary drink, and then we want kids drinking milk, or there might be cases where we're actually giving them some sort of drink supplement for a purpose that they need for nutrition raises.

[00:10:16] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** You bring up that's so important is there's a million nuances. So anyone listening, like, what about my athlete or what about my kid loves chocolate milk or how much protein, my kid doesn't do well with fiber. There's so many what ifs, and I think that it's absolutely critical to go to an expert registered dietitian to reach out to someone like yourself because there's always a unique situation, and that's what nutrition is because you're so good at pointing out we're looking at the big picture here.

[00:10:43] **Jennifer Anderson** Right. And that is one of the reasons that I've come up with these tiers and written about them in my book is I'm not gonna be there for you every single time. So how can you look at the big picture yourself and think, gosh, I don't know if my kid is affected by a red 40. Should I be worried about this? But then you can also step back and you can look at this list and say, okay, right now my kid is not eating enough fiber. I need to put all my time and energy into that, not this red 40 things, I'll get to the red 40 things. Once I get a handle on the fact that they're constipated all the time, because they are not eating enough variety, you can't focus on everything. And so you've got

to focus on the thing that's going to have the biggest bang for your buck, and that is going to be starting with the things that have the broadest impact.

[00:11:28] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** These tiers are so brilliant. Do you wanna talk really quickly about your book? Because it's coming out very soon and I know people are gonna wanna get their hands on it.

[00:11:36] **Jennifer Anderson** Yeah, so the thing about this book is it gives you tools. You actually have everything that you need. You probably just need some frameworks, some questions to ask yourself, some basic information so that you can go in and say, what's the most important thing here? That's their fiber. Or you know what, this person is telling me all this scary information and it is so sensational. So learn some techniques, learn some tools and then you can make your own decisions. You can actually feel confident. Because as a parent, I feel like often my confidence is constantly being taken away by headlines or what other people are saying online or videos of people giving advice or all this stuff. Confidence is constantly been stripped away from us and the purpose of this book is to give your confidence back, because you can do it, and you have something nobody else has and that's a really deep understanding of your child. So the book really focuses on how do you observe your child? How do you stay curious? That's what this book is about. Getting the information that you need, and then also learning how to break the rules when the rules are not meant for your family. So you don't have to accept every best practice that you hear. You don't to accept the fear that's coming out of there because you are a very engaged parent. You wouldn't be listening to this podcast if you were not an engaged parent who cares, who wants to be involved, you're there and you could do it.

[00:13:00] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I love that. It's such an empowering message. And like you mentioned right now, headlines and messaging is trying to shake our confidence and you're trying to empower folks back. So that's wonderful. 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 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. Jennifer is so clear in her messaging and I am very here for it. This conversation really comes back to one simple question, what has the broadest possible impact? When you use that lens, so many decisions become

easier to make. It's often not helpful to worry first about dyes or additives if the child you're caring for is not even getting enough nutrients to begin with. That doesn't mean those other conversations never matter, but it does mean that they're not always the first place to put your energy. I also like this framework because it's inherently inclusive. Not every family has the same access to resources. So if you ever find yourself looking at another child's nutrition and thinking, how could they be eating that? It's worth remembering that for someone else, there may be other tiers that need to come first. Okay, so we've covered the basics, but we still have three more tiers to go to hear more about food dyes, probiotics, added sugar, and even identity. Keep listening.

[00:15:15] **Jennifer Anderson** So when we start talking about tiers four, five, and six, now we're really getting into optimizing. How do I make sure my kid is getting every little thing that they need? So in tier four, we're talking about variety. If our kids are always eating the same thing, they might be okay, but if we wanna optimize that a little bit, we want them eating a wider variety of foods. Micronutrients, we wanna make sure they don't have vitamin D deficiency. We wanna make sure they are getting all their nutrients. In some cases, you may decide, you know what, I think they might need a multivitamin. I don't usually recommend those because they're not very specific and things like that, but they do come into the conversation just after we've taken care of the basics. And then we also talk about added sugars, added sodium, and added saturated fat. Now let's talk a little bit about added sugar in general. How much candy is my kid eating? How much sugary cereal am I eating? How much flavored yogurt? Are they consuming more than 25 grams a day of added sugar? If so, maybe it's worth thinking about. So again, if you've focused on fiber, guess what? You've probably reduced a little bit of your sodium. You've probably reduced a bit of your saturated fat. You've proudly reduced some of your added sugars. Just by changing the top tiers, you're already affecting the bottom tiers. But at some point, you might say, yeah, I am gonna think about this. And I think it's time that maybe we do step back a little bit from those sugary foods. And then we really get into the weeds. So now we're talking about probiotics, we're talking about dietary plant diversity, we are talking about the artificial dyes, the heavy metals, processed versus unprocessed foods. Again, it doesn't mean these aren't important. It doesn't that they won't affect your child's health, but it does mean they are not gonna have the broadest impact on your child health, hands down. Now I do like to bring up one thing when we're talking about this tier, when we were talking about fine tuning. And that is, you might not know, you might just be really curious. I wonder, are food dyes affecting my child? Don't wonder, do a test, feed them normally for two weeks, take some notes, take it completely out of their diet for a couple of weeks. You take notes, but also have someone take notes who isn't part of your family, who doesn't know that you've taken them out, right? Now we're getting an external

observer. That is gonna be so helpful. Add it back in for two weeks, see what happens and then do it again. You're gonna have two sets of data. You'll be able to actually compare it, and you're gonna be able say, you know what, I didn't actually notice anything or, oh my gosh, it was totally life-changing. Especially if you're that external person, maybe a teacher, a relative, friend, whatever. Gosh, your child really changed in the past few weeks or no, I don't notice any difference. That can be really powerful. And now you don't have to be afraid about food dyes anymore. You could just know, hey, we noticed nothing when we took it out of my child's diet.

[00:18:14] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I'm glad that you bring this up as an example. We might as well just talk about it real quick because I'd love for you to define Red 40. What is it? Why are people talking about it so much and why it's not our biggest priority?

[00:18:26] **Jennifer Anderson** Artificial food dyes, Red 40, Yellow 5, it's just in a lot of kids' stuff. So that's why it's constantly coming. Now we had data that shows if a person eats too much of these dyes bad things will happen. It's just a number that's higher than most kids are going to consume. Now there is some data showing that they might have a little bit more exposure to Yellow 5 and that's why California has decided to take artificial dyes out of their school lunches. I think avoiding food dyes when possible is great because we know that they're probably gonna experience them and get them in and other foods. And so we do wanna keep them below that threshold where we know we start to see effects.

[00:19:08] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Sometimes when I have these conversations, it gets misinterpreted as Jennifer's pro-food dye or whatever, and that's certainly not what we're saying. What we're saying here is, it might not be the highest priority as dietitians. And so, yeah, I just want to give a little shout out to anyone that might be misinterpreting us because that's not what we're saying here. Tell me about the final tier.

[00:19:30] **Jennifer Anderson** So, tier number six is what I call the identity tier, where there's like these emerging things, an important part of my identity to always feed my kids these food or to never feed my kid these foods. We don't have a lot of science behind a lot of these hot topics. Doesn't mean these topics aren't important, but it means that organic, non-organic, we don't even know what really happens if you only eat organic food, like we have no idea, but that might be important to you and it might be really important to your identity and you might believe it has a very big impact. That's totally fine and I support you, but that's also why it's in tier six where we're like, this may or may not have a broad impact on your child and it's certainly not gonna have as broad of an

impact as all of the other things that we've talked about. And so these hot topic issues, they get the most press. Tier six is the most pressed, and it's also the stuff that likely has the least broad impact if we're talking about physical health.

[00:20:33] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I always tell everyone I take the boring, unsexy approach as a dietitian and that is feed your kid enough, get them some fiber. It's the stuff that's not exciting, but it's the most important. Help them get enough sleep, help them meet their activity guidelines. And I think it's just not exciting, but it is so critical. So Jennifer, if you could leave parents with one core message about how to best support the nutrition of their growing child, what would it be?

[00:21:03] **Jennifer Anderson** This is so tricky, right? Because my whole thing is I don't know what's exactly best for your child. But I will say this, the core of variety and color covers a lot of things. If we just think about how many different foods can I feed them and how much color, when I say color, I'm generally thinking fruits and veggies and that sort of thing. Those two things together often cover a lot of tiers. We talk about protein variety, fruit and vegetable variety, grain variety, all of that. And then we also talk about getting color in wherever we can. All of a sudden we start hitting a lot of points with that.

[00:21:41] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I love that, thank you Jennifer. We have reached the end of our first conversation with Jennifer, and I have to say, I'm feeling really good after this one. Nutrition is inherently complex, but what I love about today's conversation is that it gives us a way to step back and prioritize. I hope this episode is a reminder that you don't have to let the headlines shake your confidence or convince you that you're not doing enough. Caring for a child does not mean doing every single thing perfectly. It means focusing on the basics you can control and remembering that those things often matter the most. And if you have the capacity to do a little more, that is wonderful too. But caregiving is already hard enough without holding yourself to an impossible standard. So to all the parents, caregivers and supporters out there, You've got this. But wait, before you go, we are not done with Jennifer just yet. In our next episode, we'll dive into the behavioral side of kids' nutrition, including hyper-palatable foods, picky eating, and screens at the dinner table. You will not wanna miss it. 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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