



1022: Why I Let My Kids Eat Whatever They Want
(Solo Episode)

Child: Welcome to my mommy's podcast!

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This can create better energy efficiency in a given location of the body. For instance, red light on your face gives more cellular energy for biological processes. This can help to decelerate the signs of aging and lead to firmer, plumper skin. So the long-term results you can see when using an LED mask over time are things like, reduction in the appearance of fine lines, reduction in the appearance of wrinkles, reduction in under eye bags, firmer skin, tighter skin, reduction in signs of aging, scar fading, plumper looking skin, reduction in visibility of blemishes, and visibly clearer looking skin.

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This episode is brought to you by Hiya Health. Everyone's talking about their New Year's resolutions, and while everyone else is promising to hit the gym in 2026, I am focusing on something much easier that'll actually stick (gym's already pretty well a habit for me) which is better nutrition for my younger kids.

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and this solo episode is going to tackle the topic and question I get relatively often on social media and via the website of things related to kids and food and what I do or don't make or request my kids to eat. And essentially how in general, I let my kids eat whatever they want and what that means.

And some of this I feel like might be surprising based on what you might expect of me and my kids and knowing what I know about nutrition and how I eat and how this translates to my kids and my, my theories around that. I'll say before jumping in, obviously this is entirely my opinion. It is meant for inspiration only and not as anything prescriptive or informational beyond that.

I am strictly sharing what works for me, my own opinion and how I navigate this, and I would love to hear your feedback and how you navigate this as well. I will also link to some resources in the show notes, including blog posts I've written on related topics like this, as well as a book I recently read and really enjoyed that I feel like summed up a lot of this very concisely, which was called Common Sense Childrearing, and that's linked in the show notes as well.

But in this one I'm gonna delve into why controlling kids food too tightly, actually can backfire, and how that actually plays into adult psychology as well. The really fascinating research around this, how to create healthy habits without micromanaging, which I feel like this applies broadly to many aspects of parenting.

Removing the good and bad labels and the morality associated with food and how I had to do this work as an adult. And then some more hands-on practical strategies. And I know this can be a controversial topic. Anything in the realm of parenting and children in general can be a controversial topic, and for some reason food seems to be, especially so. I know that some parents worry that if they let their kids have autonomy in what they ate, they would only eat macaroni and cheese and chicken nuggets or cereal or whatever their foods might be if given the choice.

And I can understand that concern certainly. I've had a different experience in that both in relearning and reframing my own food psychology as an adult, and the shifts I've had over now almost 19 years of parenting with my kids. And how this has played out across six kids with very different personalities and at very different ages.

So I'll go into some detail about what this approach looks like for me. And the practical aspects of it. This also stems from my core parenting belief that each of my children are each an infinite autonomous being. That I get to walk this journey with them, but I don't own them or control them, and that the goal is for them to be self-sufficient, healthy, well-adjusted, kind, happy, contributing, and loving members of society, of relationships, and of family units one day.

And so this stems from respecting that agency and autonomy and respecting them and their personhood even from a very young age. I will also say before jumping in, this does not mean that I am a short order cook. This does not mean that I stock my pantry with whatever junk foods they would want. Does not mean that I go out of my way to cook unhealthy things by any means. There are kind of caveats and detail and nuance to this that I'll get into in a little while. But I wanted to go into some of, kind of the background of this first. Now before we get in, I'll go, I'll elaborate on these a little bit more, but there's some really interesting data around this that can seem counterintuitive until you kind of understand it.

There's a study in *Appetite* that showed that restriction actually increases desire for food and I would guess many of us as adults can understand this when we think about it. If you've had the mentality ever of going on a diet, you might be more attracted to certain foods when you aren't supposed to have them or when you said you can't have them.

It's kind of the idea in a more metaphysical sense of, I believe it was Anthony De Mello that said this is, when you renounce something we are actually bound to it energetically because we've created an energetic bond to this thing by creating the energy of renouncing it. And especially with kids, they found that restricted kids ate more cookies when they were allowed to consume whatever foods unrestricted than kids who were not restricted.

So kids who were not restricted in any way tended to be more in touch with their own body's cues and didn't have as much of a desire to consume as much of foods like cookies. I've also heard kind of, eating disorder specialists and intuitive eating coaches talk about this: that often when someone comes in with highly disordered eating or they have a lot of trigger foods from binge eating for years and they have a whole list of foods they can't eat. That one of the first things they will do is remove all food restrictions and instead help them learn to be very present when they eat, to pay attention to what they're eating and eat a little more slowly.

Eat undistracted, and that actually being more present and less restricted over time helps us to get back in touch with our body's natural cues. There's also some interesting data around self-regulation. Which, especially in toddlers, is fascinating to me that toddlers can balance their intake of all the important nutrients and macros.

Even across days within a week period. So there was an NEJM study, or NEJM study, sorry, that children compensated calories at later meals after overeating. So if kids, toddlers naturally adjusted, if they got more calories than they needed, they tended to eat less in the few meals following and vice versa.

And they're potentially much more in touch with their hunger and how like restricted restricting their food choices kind of over time can erode this being in touch with their natural cues. Research has also shown that pressure to eat certain foods backfires. So kids pressured to eat vegetables often eat fewer vegetables later in life.

And that was from the Journal of Nutrition Education. And there's also a link here to eating disorders, which I know is its own whole topic and a delicate one. And I don't have direct experience with any kind of extreme eating disorders. So I don't claim to have firsthand understanding of this.

But there is data to show that controlling feeding practices is linked with a higher instance of disordered eating behaviors in adolescents and teens. And that was from the International Journal of Eating Disorders. So I know as parents, we all wanna do what's best for our kids and hopefully to help them create a solid foundation in all areas of their lives, including when it comes to food.

And for me, this has certainly been an almost now 20 year journey of learning by trial and error, by research, and by looking at data like this. And I have certainly had an evolution of this in my own approach and wanted to share kind of the first principles and the ways that I got to where I am now. Which is the idea that there's problems with policing food, and again, I would say this metaphor actually extends somewhat into a lot of areas of parenting that I'm not gonna delve into today.

But psychologically, anytime we create big dichotomies or frame things as good or bad, or try to restrict something or push other things, we create the opportunity for pushback from our kids. Their data does show that food battles create stress and power struggles at the table. I don't think we even need data to tell us if any of us have experienced that. That those aren't probably very fun situations for parents or children.

As I mentioned, research shows that kids who are pressured to eat certain foods, like eat more vegetables, are likely to eat less of those foods long term and especially later in life when they have more agency. I know for me, one way that I saw this play out in my own life was we, were often on a tight budget when I was growing up and we just also didn't eat out a lot.

And a lot of those things were kind of framed as bad. And so I went through a phase in high school and college where when I was able to choose what I ate I, and I know this is very common in teenagers, but I often chose really ultra processed foods and fast food because I could. And so there was an element there for me at least, where restriction led those things to feel more enticing.

And actually, as I healed my relationship with food as an adult and started paying attention to my body, I realized I didn't actually enjoy the taste of those or the way my body felt, but that I had a psychological attraction to them because they had been forbidden when I was younger. Research also shows that restriction backfires.

Like I said, restricted food becomes more appealing. Another example, not related to food that I've shared of this before is that I wasn't allowed to get my ears pierced when I was little. And then I wasn't allowed to get a second piercing after I got my first one at 13. And so I had a phase when I turned 18 where I had a lot of piercings simply because I could.

And again, with that over time, realized they weren't actually that comfortable, nor did I enjoy having that many piercings. It was attractive because it was forbidden. So I've been aware as a parent of trying to create balance and healthy structure and boundaries without creating unnecessary places where kids push back just simply because something has been restricted. Like I said, the study in Appetite found that restricting quote unquote junk food increases children's desire for it and their tendency to overeat it when it becomes available. I also think it's worth talking about the concept of framing food as good or bad and bringing sort of morality into nutrition. And how there is some evidence that this can set the stage for disordered eating.

I certainly have not done this perfectly. As a parent, I try to frame things and have educational conversations, especially when my kids are interested in the way that foods

benefit us or the way they are just interacting in our bodies based on what we know, so that they have more knowledge from which to make choices.

And not framing junk food as bad, or not framing vegetables as good, but explaining what's actually going on in the body and why the body might want more protein or might want more vegetables or fruit, so that they can learn those cues for themselves. So that was a little bit of the theory of it. Here's what I do kind of on a practical level, and these are guidelines I have learned slowly.

I wish I had known all of this when my oldest were little. This has certainly evolved with my kids and my years of parenting. But the first is that I now don't have any punishments or rewards or even incentives related to food. So there's no, if you don't finish your food, you can't have dessert. There's no, if you eat all your vegetables, you can have screen time.

There's no, if you don't eat your dinner, you're eating it for breakfast. I feel like all of those are places that tend to create artificial walls. And for me, I want them to be able to stay in tune with their natural hunger cues, and to me that is a bigger priority than even them getting as like however many servings of vegetables I would love for them to have in a week, or as much protein as I feel like would be important for them in a day.

I also realize that when they choose anything nutritional, it carries much more weight and power because it was their choice and it's likely to become a healthier, long-term habit if they choose it versus if I incentivize it or punish it. I also don't, like I said, moralize food, so I avoid good or bad labels or kind of ranking foods against each other.

I'll get more into this later on. That does not mean that I have all foods available in our house. I still consider it my responsibility as their parent to have nutrient-dense foods available and a wide range of them, so they can get varied micronutrients, and especially in enough healthy fats and proteins, as well as natural foods, living foods, single ingredient foods.

So I'm not stocking my pantry with Oreos and Lucky Charms. I'm just also not requiring them to eat certain amounts of food or trying to get them to eat certain things. I consider it very much in their realm of agency and responsibility to decide when they are hungry. And yes, kids at times will say they're not hungry when what they mean is, I don't like what you cooked.

And I still respect that because it is ultimately their choice, what they do or do not put in their body. And they are not likely to have long-term, lifelong harm by choosing to skip eating one meal they don't like. They also always have access to things like in our house, eggs, leftover cooked protein, fruits, vegetables that they can get on their own and eat.

But I don't cook short order meals for them. So I provide nutrients, dense meals and snacks. They always have an availability of those. And then I allow freedom of choice within that. I also, when I cook family meals, that's what's available. I'm not gonna cook separately for each child, so they can go access other proteins or vegetables if they want.

And I just don't create battles around it. I also feel it's very important to model eating a wide variety of foods. I actually feel like this is one of the most powerful tools we have, much more so than trying to incentivize or restrict food. And even when I eat things like sardines, at first they were not a big fan of those or wanting to try them.

And over time they've branched out and now will sometimes make things like sardines or salmon salad for lunch on their own. So I think modeling carries a lot more weight than we often give it. I also, whenever they are ask or are open, use the opportunities to explain the way that food interacts with our body biochemically, how nutrients work, what protein does, what amino acids are, why we need minerals, how our body's electrically communicating, and things like electrolytes and minerals help that process.

I want them to have a foundation for understanding why, if they're paying attention, why I would be making certain food choices. And then have the ability to make those choices themselves. And I will talk more about this later as well, but I think when children's agency is respected and they actually feel true autonomy in their choice, they often will surprise us with the choices they make and how much they can understand and how much they're capable of really making good choices much earlier than we often expect.

Especially in the Western world, I feel like there's almost an expectation that kids only want to eat bland food or junk food or ultra processed food. And I think this is partially an availability issue. I think this is also partially an expectation issue, and I do think that things like restriction plays into this as well. When they're little, when like, first foods and toddlers, my strategy was to make a wide variety of food available, make it fun, but never stressful or incentivized. Even at that age, I wasn't like, okay, try to eat one bite. I would just eat it. And especially at the younger ages, me eating something was enough, often to encourage them to wanna try it when they are still like really kind of bonded with us when they're little.

And then with older kids, I give them that full autonomy and trust, still provide a wide variety of foods in the house. And I don't restrict or punish. So when they are at restaurants or their friends' houses, I don't make comments about what they choose to eat or not. I don't restrict that.

Obviously there are allergy cases that are different that I, I don't have kids with allergy, so I'm not dealing with that. Those would be cases where there would still have to be

restriction, obviously for health reasons. But I don't restrict or try to monitor or even ask about their food choices when they aren't with me.

And I will say my older ones, from what I know and the times I do see, they still tend to make really good choices even when they aren't home. I also know that because of their solid foundation, they are resilient and they are not likely to have long-term ill consequences from occasionally eating foods that I might not choose when they're somewhere else.

Their bodies are resilient and in general, often with lots of things, the dose makes the poison. So even the things I wouldn't have in the house, like vegetable oil, they're not likely to have long-term damage if they get small amounts of that somewhere else. So that also helps remove the stress from that situation.

Here's why I feel like, as I've seen my kids get older, I've seen them take responsibility for their food choices and like I said, really make good choices entirely separate of me. Which is what I feel like is the ultimate goal with them when it comes to food, because of course they are going to have to navigate eating choices their whole life, long after I am raising them day to day, and then they're at home with me. So to me, this is a very important skill and one I wanted to impart to them and let them have responsibility for as soon as it was appropriate. The reason I feel like this works: by not being their external control of this and by not restricting, we're helping them build body awareness.

And helping them stay in touch with their natural hunger and satiety clues, which they are born with. I remember when nursing all my kids, you really cannot force a breastfed baby to eat once they're full. You also will have trouble consoling them if they're really hungry, they let you know. And they're very in touch with their hunger cues.

And obviously these shift somewhat as we get older anyway, and hopefully get less urgent. We don't have to scream as much when we're hungry. However, I think a lot of the things we have in modern society and the way we approach food, over time we learn to tune out our natural hunger and satiety cues.

And of course we do have massive industries with you know, scientists trying to engineer foods to be highly palatable and highly addictive. That is something a lot of previous generations have not had to face in the same way. So I do try to avoid having those foods in my house, but the priority with my kids is to help them to learn and stay in touch with their natural hunger and satiety cues. This is something I had to nurture in myself as an adult, especially after years of chronic dieting. And kind of different ways I had a disordered relationship with food. I didn't have an eating disorder per se, but I had these restrictive

cycles and some morality related to foods being good or bad and had like self punished and restricted lots of foods.

And there were times that for health reasons, I was on a protocol, like the autoimmune protocol and I was eating quite restricted for a while for health reasons. So there was a lot that went into that for me as well. Another reason I feel like this works and that this has been helpful in my house is that as a mentality, this encourages autonomy and trust.

It reinforces that kids know their bodies better than anyone else, including me, and it honors their agency, which often seems to lead to better choices, without the power struggles. When they really trust that it is their decision, they're able to take more responsibility for that. And there's nothing in, in the dynamic with us to push back on for there to be a battle.

It also subtly reinforces that they have full autonomy around their own body. And this has crossover, of course, into many other areas of parenting as well, which might be topics of separate podcasts at some point. But this is also why I don't force or encourage them to hug and kiss relatives if they don't want to or anything that involves their bodily autonomy.

I want to make sure that they feel confident, comfortable, and supported in boundaries when it relates to their physical body in all realms, so that that also then shows up in their boundaries around their body in future situations. I also hope that by not moralizing food, that we can avoid the guilt and shame cycles around food that many people enter adulthood with.

I certainly had these and I've learned to work through them as an adult, but when foods are good or bad, then we can feel bad about eating the foods that are bad. And this creates kind of a whole sort of self-sabotaging, negative internal cycle. And if we can remove the morality and there's no good or bad. It hopefully helps our kids to stay more in touch with their natural cues, what they actually are hungry for. And if there's cravings, often those can indicate something the body actually needs. As I said, I feel like kids often surprise parents by making really balanced choices if they're given the chance.

I find over and over again that my kids surprise me with how capable they are of this and how wise they are when they're given the chance to be. Research shows that children have innate regulation abilities. Even toddlers can self-regulate calorie intake day to day, even if one meal is imbalanced.

So again, they do kind of come with these innate cues and we really just get to help them, preserve them and strengthen those over time. And that particular study was in the New England Journal of Medicine. Also a 2020 review found that authoritative parenting of structure and autonomy around food leads to healthier eating patterns than authoritarian.

So authoritative versus authoritarian. Authoritarian would be more rigid control, where authoritative would be structure and autonomy. So that's what I find is the balance of providing nutrient dense foods that are always available and giving them choice and agency in what they choose to eat, when they choose to eat, how much they choose to eat and all that.

And I know there might be some objections, concerns, FAQs. Again, I'm not actually trying to convince anyone to follow this approach. I'm just trying to share what's worked for me and answer some questions that I get often. But I did wanna touch on a few of these because it does seem like often when these topics come up, I hear kind of the hyperbolic extreme as objections.

So like won't they just eat sugar all day? And the reality that I've seen and that I've heard from other parents as well, is that when foods are not restricted the novelty wears off. If kids have lived in a highly restricted environment, and Dr. Thomas Cowan talks about this in Common Sense Childrearing, which has a chapter on food.

I'm gonna link to this in the show notes. If you haven't read it, it's a great short read. And I definitely agree with him on many parenting topics and I love how concisely he sums them up from his years and years and decades of research and parenting and now grandparenting. But when foods are not restricted, the novelty wears off. So if a child has been highly restricted, they might have a short term period where they sort of sort of test and see if they have agency, do want a lot of those previously forbidden foods. However, again, they self-regulate really well and over time as the novelty wears off, you might be surprised to see how they shift their choices.

Of course the objection also comes up, what about nutrients? And of course this is an important one. This is something I write about and talk about a lot from an adult perspective on Wellness Mama, and I do feel this is important. The way I handle this with my kids is, like I said, to educate when they're open, to make sure there's a wide variety of nutrient dense foods available. To minimize the ultra processed foods that, that are available without creating artificial restriction or restricting them entirely, especially if they're somewhere else. So that their default is already pretty balanced and they always have options that are going to offer nutrients. And then to again, let them make that choice.

Often they still blow me away with how capable they are and the, the good choices that they make. I also get the objection like, doesn't this lead to chaos at the dinner table? And I haven't found this at all. In fact, I found the opposite because structure still exists, which is the one where I cook one meal.

We have a family rhythm. Often I'll either cook breakfast or everybody will kind of cook breakfast and make whatever they want at the same time in the kitchen. So that is a little bit of family time. And then lunch is more varied with kids doing activities or making their own in-between sports or at whatever time they're hungry, but with nutrient dense options available. The difference here is there's no micromanagement. So I still make dinner for them and they have the option to eat it.

I'm just not trying to encourage them or regulate them or punish or reward them into or out of eating any particular food. And I've actually found there's less chaos in the house the more that I'm able to shift into this mentality and the more I can just model good habits, make nutrient dense foods available, and truly not, not just pretend to, but truly respect their agency. They rise to that in an incredible way. So some key takeaways and wrap up. And I would love any follow up questions you guys have or if you want more practical detail of how this works or if you wanted a kind of sample list of all the nutrient dense foods I keep available.

But the key takeaways I would say from this episode is that control often backfires. I strongly feel this is true actually in many areas of parenting, and that might be the topic of more podcasts in the future as well. It's a potential book I've been working on for a long time. I find that trust and modeling are incredibly powerful long term.

That connection over control always wins and that this is a very important, very physical, very tangible area where I can honor their agency, trust them, have a relationship with them, educate them when they're available, make sure they always have nutrients available, and then really honor their agency.

I firmly believe that children learn how to make great choices when they are given respect, autonomy, and a positive example, without the force, the punishment, the rewards, or the control. So my final thought here is, my goal is not to raise kids who clean their plate or who never let one bite go to waste.

It is to raise adults who trust their bodies, who have the foundational knowledge to know how to nourish themselves, and the confidence and autonomy to make the choices that actually do that, long beyond when they are living at home with me. And I would be able to even control those choices if I wanted to.

I would love to hear what you think of this topic, how you navigate it, as well as future topics you would love for me to tackle. As always, I read every rating and review and I'm really grateful anytime you take a moment to review anywhere you listen to podcast. I also read the comments on these blog posts and most messages on Instagram, so I'd love to hear your feedback there as well as who you would like me to interview in the future.

What topics or questions you would like me to cover. Also, if you are not yet subscribed to, every week I send an email called Wellness Wednesday, which has some quick tips and things I'm loving each week, specific to moms and families. And you can join my VIP list at wellnessmama.com and you'll also get notified when there are new podcasts or new blog posts as well.

But for today, I am deeply, deeply grateful to you for listening, for sharing your time with me. Would love to hear your feedback. Thank you so much for listening. Have a wonderful day.