



Episode 299: How Serenity Kids Is Revolutionizing the Baby Food Industry

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the "Wellness Mama" podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com. And this episode is all about babies and what they should be eating and what they should not be eating. Because I am here with Joe and Serenity Carr who are the co-founders of Serenity Kids Baby Food. And they're on a mission to promote wellness starting at first bite. They basically, when they were planning their family realized there were no spectacular baby food options out there that would be anywhere close to the sourcing that most of us demand on our food and realized that babies need, for instance, much more fat than they're getting in a lot of their diet and much less sugar than as in the average baby food. So in this episode, we go deep on what's in normal baby food, what's in optimal baby food and how to find it for your own family. Super fascinating. We also delve into the world of regenerative agriculture and the environmental mission. So this is a fun one. Here we go.

Joe and Serenity, welcome. Thanks for being here.

Serenity: Thanks for having us, Katie. We're excited to be here.

Joe: Yeah.

Katie: So excited to chat with you guys today not only because I love both of you as friends and I love your company, but because I know that you have so much knowledge and expertise to share in this realm and I can't wait to jump in. I also know that much like me, your story of your brand comes from a personal story a little bit as well. So I'd love if we could start there and let the audience get to know you a little bit better.

Serenity: Sure. I'll start. So my mom was a vegetarian when she was pregnant with me, which in the 70s was the healthiest thing that anyone knew or could think of. And we didn't know at the time that I don't tolerate wheat or dairy, which were big staples in her vegetarian 1970s diet. And so when I was two weeks old, I had my first ear infection and round of antibiotics. And, you know, I was basically, this is repeated throughout my childhood. A few times a year, I would be on antibiotics for strep throat or ear infections, whatever, you know, all of those litany of little childhood illnesses. And then that led to massive stomach problems later. And I don't mean very much later. I mean, when I was nine.

You know, I won't ever forget, I was laying on my water bed, curled up in abdominal pain and I had just seen a commercial for like, I don't know, Imodium or something and, you know, lots of commercials for Pepto Bismal. And I was like, "Mom, can't I get some of this medicine? Won't that help?" You know. And she said, "No, I'm sorry honey. There's not a whole lot we can do." And I just remember thinking, "Oh, I guess I'm just sort of stuck with this pain and I'm gonna have to live with it." So I started having major antacid or major acid reflux in my teenager years and started taking antacids. I took Pepcid AC every day for probably 15 years or something like it. And in 2010, I got another ear infection and round of antibiotics. And at that point, somehow something had happened in my stomach and it just was so painful. I couldn't eat food after that. I couldn't drink water without serious pain. And I went to the doctor and she put me on some stronger proton pump inhibitor, you know, antacid type medicine.

And I went back in two weeks for my followup visit and I said, "Thank you doctor. I do feel better. You know, this is great." And she said, "No, don't leave yet. I need to write you a refill." And I said, "Well, how long do I have to take this stuff?" And she said, very dramatically, "Every day for the rest of your life." And I'm glad she did because that was really my wake up call. You know, I was 33 years old, and getting put on medicine for the rest of my life. Like, this baffled me. It did not make any sense at all. And I wasn't convinced that that was the right way for me. Even though my doctor was telling me that's what I needed to do. So I got desperate and I called my dad. He's a psychologist. He talks me down, calms me down, and he said, "You know, you should probably really read that book I gave you last year for Christmas, you know, the one on the Paleo diet." And I'm scratching my head, I'm like, "What book?" You know, he gives me dumb dad books all the time. I don't remember him giving me this book, but I found it on my bookshelf, lo and behold, and it was Mark Sisson's, "Primal Blueprint." And I read it and it just made sense to me.

I have an anthropology background, and so the parts about, you know, our ancient ancestors and biology and evolution, that all made really sense to me and kind of hit home. And I changed my diet right away and I'm not on that medicine anymore, you know. That was nine years ago and I've been really cleaning up my diet and eating healthy and so I'm the healthiest I've ever been and I'm 42 years old. It's pretty awesome.

Joe: I'm autistic. I wasn't diagnosed with autism as a child. They didn't know what was wrong with me. I had really intense energy. I was just really big and took over every space I went to. They called me ADHD, but that wasn't accurate, so it wasn't helpful. So I think my official diagnosis was just obnoxious. And my mom discovered the performing arts, that theater and dance and music was my outlet. That huge energy was great on stage, but very difficult offstage. So became a professional child actor and, you know, did a lot of performing but really difficult social problems and also a lot of physical problems. You know, I had a lot of food sensitivities we didn't know about. I was overweight, I had stomach pain all the time, obviously tons of behavioral issues. And so on my path for self-development, you know, I wasn't diagnosed with autism until college, so I really learned on my own how to become better and how to take feedback and implement that.

And discovered also the way I ate affected it. So I had tried all kinds of different diets. I was vegetarian. I tried vegan. I was on the GAPS diet. I did candida cleanses and discovered that I really didn't need grains, that meat and veggies was a pretty good diet for me, but hadn't really gone all the way. And then I met Serenity and she introduced me to the Paleo diet. Fell in love with her and Paleo at the same time. And, you know, that lifestyle's really changed my, you know, it's lowered my anxiety. It's really helped me focus better. You know, my digestion issues are gone. You know, and it was really impactful.

Serenity: Yup. And then, in 2016, we were at Paleo f(x), which is a local conference here in Austin for the Paleo community and really kind of whole foods community, and we started talking about starting a family someday.

Joe: I've always wanted kids. I drew pictures of my future children when I was five. I still have them.

Serenity: Brittany and Jason.

Joe: Little Brittany and Jason were my daughter and son I drew pictures of that I predicted I would have. I've always wanted kids. And so as soon as Serenity and I got serious, it was like, "Let's make a baby."

Serenity: Yup. So I was a little more nervous, but I was on board. So I started getting all fuzzy and maternal at Paleo f(x) and I'm like, "Joe, let's go find the baby stuff." You know, what was out there for babies here in the health food space? And we found exactly zero. Nothing was there. And I went up to the head of Paleo f(x) and I said, "Hey, Michelle, where's the baby stuff?" And she said, "You know, I ask myself that same question every year." So I thought, "Okay, well we'll just make our own baby food." But Joe was in the process of reinventing himself as an entrepreneur. He had just left his startup company he was working for, and he came back from a workshop he went to and he said, "We've gotta do this baby food business. It meets all these criteria. We can

get support. You know, there's a white space." Because really there was nothing on the grocery store shelf or even purchasable online that met my nutrition standards. There was one company that had some frozen stuff from Alaska, but it was extremely expensive. And, you know, frozen stuff just isn't as convenient. And so...

Joe: It had a lot of grains mixed in it too.

Serenity: Oh, yeah, you're right. I forgot the rice.

Joe: So I mean I was determined for a better work life balance. I have a big mission. I wanna change the world, I wanna change the world for kids. But I was working 90-hour weeks with startups trying to make change and was, like, "I can't have a baby and have this lifestyle. There's gotta be a better way." So I read Tim Ferriss's "Four Hour Work Week" and he opened my mind to the idea of a product that you could, instead of doing services hour for hour, you can create a product that makes a bigger impact and also doesn't take as much of your time once you get it rolling. So I was looking for an empty space in the market and discovered that there was a lack of Paleo baby food. And so we initially had the idea of maybe making specifically a Paleo product that was marketed to the Paleo community. But then Serenity learned more about infant nutrition.

Serenity: Yeah. So that summer of 2016, you know, I was a little embarrassed. I mean, I didn't know what babies should be eating. You know, I had been on this health food journey eating whole foods for six years, but I didn't know if babies are supposed to eat the same thing, you know, like meats and veggies. And I wasn't sure, maybe they should eat rice cereal like I did when I was a baby. And so it was my summer of nerdism. I really spent the entire summer with my nose in a book, a blog, a podcast. I even read the USDAs Guide to Infant Nutrition, you know, and Wellness that they give to mamas of WIC. And it became really clear that everybody... I mean, for the most part, a lot of people were advising against excessive sugar and too little nutrition and, you know, lots of grains. But that was all that was on the shelf. And so then I got really mad. You know.

Joe: The USDA basically said fat is the most important thing, that babies need 30 grams of fat a day, which is a huge amount of fat. They said that animal products are key sources of nutrition. They absolutely recommend animal products being introduced very early. And they said that sugar is a problem. Stay away from sugar, you know, even sweet tasting foods they recommended against. But then we went to the baby food aisle and it was the polar opposite of what babies actually need. It had no fat. It was all sugary fruits. There was almost no meat.

In fact, specifically, we did a study of all 246 organic baby food pouches that were currently on the market at the time, put them all into a big spreadsheet. And we found out that the average organic baby food has an average of nine grams of sugar, you know, nine grams of sugar per pouch, which is, you know, it doesn't sound like a lot, but a baby's eating two, three of these a day, that's like 30 grams of sugar. It's, like, the equivalent of a Snickers bar, or if you equate it to an adult, you know, that's nine grams of sugar to 150 pound adult is 90 grams of sugar. So it's insane amount of sugar plus it's just not very much nutrition. Less than 1% had two

grams or more fat. So there was really zero fat on the aisle and less than 4% contained any meat at all. And none of that meat was well-sourced, you know, nobody disclosed their sourcing. So it wasn't grass fed or pasture raised or anything.

So we felt this was a huge problem and way bigger than the Paleo community, that this was something that every mom needed to know that we became on a mission to transform the baby food aisle and, you know, really, really make a very different kind of baby food. So we decided to test them in our kitchen first.

Serenity: Yeah. So you know, that same summer when we had the idea for the business, we ran the business idea behind some experts in the industry. And, you know, we had said, "Oh, we plan to just be kind of a little niche Paleo brand for our little community." And they said, "No, the world needs this. You know, more babies need access to this than just your little health food community that already knows, you know, this is what they want. You need to go out there and educate people." And so...

Joe: We weren't sure if babies would eat it.

Serenity: That was my biggest fear. I was, like, "maybe no one makes this product because babies won't actually eat it." So I'm like, "Joe, we've got to go make this baby food, whatever it is. We've got to just experiment and try to find some babies." Because we didn't have a baby at the time yet. You know, we're still not even married at the time. And so, I'll never forget, we made a recipe, one of, in fact, it's one of our recipes that the babies ended up choosing. So we actually did the surveys and we'd let the babies choose the flavors for us to make because we thought, "who better than a baby focus group?" And it was the chicken, pea, and carrot flavor. We gave it to one of our friends and she... It was in a pouch that we pouched ourselves at home and she emailed back a picture of her son eating it and she said, "He wouldn't let me take the pouch out of his hands. He insisted on holding it the whole time and he ate the whole thing and wanted more."

And I cried because here I was, right, knowing that babies are getting the short end of the stick, you know, by these food manufacturers that are not providing nutritious food out there, that parents would totally feed them this healthy food if it was available and super convenient. And then a baby who is loving it. You know, he just gobbled it down. He loved the high fat, the higher protein, the lower sugar, which you know, if you look around... When we talked to some manufacturers they were, like, Oh no, you've gotta make it sweet or babies won't eat it." Well, that's bunk. You know, babies know what is healthy especially if you catch them really young, you know, then their palates aren't tainted by hyper palatable foods or maybe too sweet of foods or too bland of foods or too salty or whatever. And it just proved that, like, our product might have a chance at succeeding.

Joe: We did three rounds of testing. We tested about 30 different recipes, all passed them out to babies, babies, friends of babies, friends of friends of babies, like all kinds of babies tested it and got lots of feedback and then identified the recipes that we ended up taking to market. And they came out for sale. It took a long time for us to get them out. Turns out putting shelf stable, you know, making them a shelf stable meat puree

in a pouch is pretty hard, particularly because the factories are used to putting fruit purees in there. So we're using the same machinery for fruit purees that for a high fat meat puree. And it took a long time to get it right. But it finally came out and launched for sale on the same day our baby, Della, was born.

Serenity: The same day.

Joe: Baby Della was about two weeks early and the products were about a year and a half late. And it turned out to be the same exact day, which was just a, you know, a nightmare logistically, but was a sign of sheer divine synchronicity, you know, that showed us that this is all meant to be.

Katie: I love that story and I feel you guys on that one. I haven't quite yet birthed a physical product baby. It's coming from me. But I did have final edits of a book due on my due date with my last daughter and then I had to do a photo shoot two weeks after she was born. And I know just how stressful that is to have multiple babies born at the same time like that. So cheers to you guys for that. I also think you're so right about the need to completely overhaul the baby food industry. Because that was something when I had my first child, I started researching as well and was really dismayed that there were no good options. And I also made my own baby food but I didn't make it at scale. So I'm so glad you guys are.

And I love that you talk about specifically the need for fat because breast milk has a lot of fat. Babies are designed to consume a lot of fat and like you said, baby food doesn't contain enough or any in most cases. And one of my early influences was reading the work of Weston A. Price. And he talked about how fat soluble vitamins affect a lot of aspects of development, but especially, like, jaw development and having a wide maxilla, which means getting more air into your body because you have a wider airway also potentially not needing braces. There's a lot of reasons that in those early phases we really do need fat and protein as well, but fat even more so. So I love that you guys really tackle that. Can you talk a little bit more about why, like, meat and fat are so important for babies? Because you're right, this is not something that's commonly talked about and it's so, so important.

Serenity: Yeah. So actually, so during that summer of nerdom, it took me, I don't know, a month or so and then I had a big aha moment. I realized that there was already a perfect baby food out there and it was mother's milk. Like you said, breast milk has a lot of fat. So the macronutrient profile of breast milk from the calorie perspective, it's about, you know, about half fat and half carbs with like you said, just kind of a little bit of protein. And so, and I was surprised by that. I imagined that babies would need more protein, but no, it was the fat and the carb balance that was really important. And so we needed to figure out, I decided, I was like, "Okay, let's just model our recipes just after breastmilk. Let's do something and make sure that the macros kind of approximate breast milk."

So really that's how we did it. In fact, Joe... I dragged Joe to the Austin milk bank, which is the biggest milk bank in the country for, you know, Breastfeeding Awareness Month because I wanted to learn a lot more about breastmilk and there's not a lot of data out there. There's not a lot of information. Like, it just frustrates

me that we send people to the moon, but we don't know what's in milk that feed our own babies. You know? Anyway, that's another diatribe. But really, we wanted to figure out how to get the right fats and the right quantities and the right proteins and the right carbs, which were easier to find and source into our product.

And so we ended up deciding to choose to go with a meat-based product, which was pretty evident early on. And the reason we chose that is because of its sheer nutrient density. You know, bite for bite, a well-sourced meat has way more nutrition than a well-sourced grain or legume or even a lot of different carbohydrates veggie-wise. So we were trying... You know, every parent who's fed an infant understands that each bite counts. If you get one bite of food into that baby, that's an amazing feat and you wanna make sure that it's packed with nutrition. We want it packed with not only the fat, carbohydrates and proteins, but also like you said, that soluble vitamins, minerals, different kinds of fiber at different stages of the baby's life. And we really wanna make sure that, you know, we can pack as much nutrition in there.

So the issue was that we wanted to make sure that our meat was the best meat possible. And by that, I mean the most nutritious. And so we started looking around for suppliers of what is the most nutritious meat. So it was pasture raised meats, meats raised outside, free range for poultry, grass fed grass finished for cattle, and we couldn't find any... Well, we found one supplier that supplied to businesses. You know, like, kind of manufacturers, food manufacturers, but the rest of them, there was no supply chain for this kind of product that we were looking for. And I suspect that's why no one else is really doing this. So we had to work with individual farmers and talk to them about how they raise their animals and, you know, how they catch the fish and really find out the best way to source those products.

Joe: Yeah. I mean, the science is quite clear on the nutrient density of meat on particularly grass-fed beef has been studied immensely to prove how much more vitamins, minerals, Omega three to Omega nine ratios, amino acid profiles by, in every respect, grass-fed beef is superior, you know, by a long shot to conventional raise beef. They've proven it's true for pasteurized pork and pasteurized chickens as well. So that's really clear. The science is clear that babies can digest meat, that there's no reason to wait to give babies meat. Breast milk is an animal product. You know, it's from a woman. And so other animal products are very natural first foods. Even pediatricians will agree that animal products are important.

For some reason, the Pediatric Association still recommends fortified rice cereal as a first food, even though they'll say that. And then you say, "Well, isn't meat an important food?" And they're, like, "Sure," you know. So, like, nobody disagrees that meat is good for babies, that they have all the, there's your digestive systems uniquely suited for it. And that pasteurized meat is clearly superior nutritionally. And, that was, like, what should we, we were looking at a nutrient dense product, that's what baby should be eating is really well-fed animals make well-fed babies.

Serenity: And specific nutrients we're talking about were zinc and then iron, you know. People talk a lot about iron and from a first foods perspective. And so when you're looking at grass-fed beef, you know, it has just a huge amount of iron that is easily digestible. It doesn't constipate like a supplement might or even a fortified food. So getting your vitamins and nutrients from real food sources is superior almost all of the time to finding

it in a supplement form. And so we wanted to really make sure that we provided those options for parents because they weren't out there before

Joe: And we weren't the only... It wasn't totally new to put meat in baby food. Gerber had plenty of, you know, they call them mystery meat baby foods that are, like, you know, the light jar of spinny sausages or these, like, weird beef and gravy. But they were really gross.

Serenity: Yeah. So, you know, during our R&D process, I bought everything that was out there, right? You know, we wanted to taste it all, check the consistency, see what it was like. And I'll never forget on the shelf, it stayed there for a long time and it was Gerber's ham and gravy, you know, this little tiny pink jar. And we were getting ready to do an R&D run for our second set of flavors that we launched. And so I thought, "Okay, today's the day, right? Today's the day we're gonna try it." So I opened up this little jar of Gerber ham and gravy and was knocked back by the intense smell. It smelled, I mean very strongly and I thought... I was trying to give it the benefit of the doubt, but I think kind of bad.

And then not 30 seconds later, but one of our housemates came into the kitchen. We were living in community at the time. And one of our housemates was a 12-year-old boy. And he walked into the kitchen and he goes, "Ug. Who farted? That smells terrible." And I just laughed because he was, you know, he was kinda right. It smell pretty bad. And I thought, "Well, I don't think I can try it, but Joe, he'll taste anything. He's eaten all the baby foods, you know, he'll taste meats to see if it's gone bad. I mean, he'll taste anything," and he refused. He would not even try it.

Joe: Even I wouldn't try it. It was pretty gross. So, you know, and we tried the organic. There was a handful of organic meat baby foods as well. Like I said, about 4% of the organic brands had meat, but they always, every single one of them combined it with grains or legumes. Like, they never just did a straight meat or a veggie mixture. They always add in the grains and then you know, and they can't add very much salt due to the salt limitations. So if you think of, like, mixing meat with rice with no salt, like, it's gonna be bland. And then no fat, like it wasn't a high fat meat. It was just, like ,protein and carbs basically with... Just tasted really bad.

So we were really all about it tasting good and choosing a meat, veggie combination that would taste good to both adults, to the mom who's gonna taste it and, you know, affects how the kid likes it or not. But also to help babies palates develop, to enjoy the taste of vegetables, to enjoy the taste of meat, to meat, veggie combinations, which is what we eat. And, you know, Serenity's culinary background, having just been Paleo for six years, figuring out how to be a foodie and Paleo, she got really good at those kinds of recipe development.

Katie: I love that story and I love that you guys are so careful about the sourcing because those of us in the real food world, we're very careful about that as adults. But you're right, this is not something that's often considered in the baby food world and it's even more important, like you mentioned in the beginning, based on their size and the percentage of what they're consuming compared to what it would be like if we consumed it. I know that this is something that you guys have put a lot of time and detail and effort into getting really

dialed in. So let's talk about that. Like, let's talk about where these meats are sourced from and basically the criteria that you guys have for making sure that you're getting the top quality to these babies.

Joe: Sure, yeah. You know, social justice and environmentalism is, like, one of my autistic obsessions. You know, like I'm just very passionate. It, you know, pains me to create waste. I was even a vegetarian and vegan for four years because I, you know, believed at the time that that was, like, good for the environment and good for animals and so forth. So I'm very passionate about this. So we knew we wanted, you know, pasture-raised meat because of its nutritional quality. But it was important for me that it'd be a good life for the animals, and that also that we support farmers that are doing it right.

My mom grew up on a small family farm in Southern Missouri. So I grew up visiting them and seeing how much harmony they lived with the land and the animals, but also how difficult it was economically for them to compete with these large factory farms. And we've all seen the pictures and read the facts on factory farms and how they pollute the environment and how they torture the animals and how awful they are. And now essentially, all meat is getting a bad rap because of these major farm practices. But meanwhile, there's these incredible small family farms that are raising their animals in harmony with nature. They're mimicking the way the animal would have lived in the wild.

So essentially, these animals have you know, the best possible life that they could have. And when they're harvest-ready, you know, they're harvested for food just like in the wild, they would be hunted by other predators. And, you know, the nutrition is superior and the lifestyle is important to support. And so we made a commitment very early on to source our meat from small family farms that are, you know, that we can know people's names. We can visit that, talk to the animals every day. You know, we met their kids and their kids are helping raise these animals. Like, it just felt so right to have the integrity of that with the meat in our pouches that were making babies healthier with also be, you know, making farmers healthier and making animals healthier and ultimately making the planet healthier.

You know, we learned about the regenerative agricultural movement that these farmers are practicing where they're regenerating the soil with the way they raise their animals. It's not just sustainable, do no harm. It's like regenerative. It's year by year their soil is improving, the water runoff is less, they're sequestering carbon. So these animals are sequestering more carbon than they produce, so it's a net benefit, you know, for climate change. And it's increasingly considered, one of the biggest tools we have to fight climate change is regenerative farming. Because we can use the way we grow food and the way we raise animals to sequester carbon. And it's not coincidentally turns out that that's also the most nutrition for our bodies as well.

Serenity: And for me, like, I didn't know what the big deal about sequestering carbon was. So just for anyone who was in my position when we started down this journey. So like the climate change is caused by too much carbon in the air and basically because that carbon has come out of the soil or out of organic matter, trees and things like that, and gotten into the air and fossil fuels, you know, it's come out of the ground, right? And so what we need to do is bring it back into the ground. And so the things that bring it back into the ground are trees, grasses, plants. And, you know, when you're looking at a factory farm, if you drive by or even look at

Google earth, you'll see a bunch of giant, big, round, brown patches, bare earth. And so that bare earth, not only does it not have any plant life to help pull that carbon back into the soil, but it's also generally packed down. So like Joe said, so that the water runs off and it actually causes more erosion. So it not only, you know, is unhealthy soil to begin with, but then it starts eroding that soil and causing further degradation to the land. So the more plants we can cover the world with, right, get rid of that barren land and cover it with grasses and trees and bushes and all kinds of different plants, then the lower the carbon in the air will be. And, you know, hopefully that will prevent or slow some of the global warming that's been happening.

Joe: And to be clear, bringing animals in a strategic way regrows the land. Like chicken, you know, poultry like, birds peck it up and kind of till it. Ruminants, eat the tall, any of the weeds that are shading outgrowth and like leave behind manure. You know, foragers like pigs, you know, root up the earth and move it around and encourage microbes. So animals have a key role in turning deserts into grasslands if done right just as they do in nature. And so that's what their generative farming movement's doing. So we're really excited to be supporting these farmers that are using these practices.

Serenity: And if for anyone who's interested in learning more, there is a famous TED Talk by Allan Savory of the Savory Institute. And he talks about how he kind of came up with this method and has been re-grassland defying, you know, heck takers acres, a millions of acres in Africa and, you know, where he had accidentally contributed to desertification in the past. So they can check that out.

Joe: Yeah. And just the last note about the environmental mission is the pouch. You know, initially we didn't like the idea of the plastic pouch. It's not recyclable, you know. But we found out that actually the pouch is really the lowest carbon footprint of any disposable packaging. It's, you know, a tiny percentage. You know, a glass jar or a metal can, takes way more resources to produce than the pouch. Plus, it takes up a lot more space in the landfill when it's thrown away. And about only one in five recyclable items is actually recycled in this country. And they require a lot less fuel to transport it. It takes 26 trucks to transport a million jars and you can transport a million empty pouches on one truck. So much lower carbon footprint for the pouch. Plus, we are partnered with TerraCycle to recycle our pouches. So they're not recyclable in traditional programs, but people can mail them in for free to TerraCycle and they grind them up and make flowerpots and park benches and such.

Serenity: And we are having parents participate in that. You know, that's something that our company pays for so we know how much of it is happening. And we're getting, you know, I don't know, 50 parents a month or something that are submitting their pouches in for recycling and we're hoping to increase that number.

Katie: That's amazing. And I love that you guys talk about the regenerative agriculture aspect so much because I think that's a topic that can get so polarizing. And, of course, there are people with all kinds of differing views on what is the best dietary philosophy. But we do know from the science, like you guys said that babies do need fats and proteins and especially even saturated fats. Like, this is well documented. And so we also know for instance, I don't think anybody's arguing for the benefits of, you know, feed lot factory farming at all. No, we all agree on that, that that's not good for the animals and it's not good for the planet. And I love that you

guys are making it part of your mission to both educate and to make buying decisions based on regenerative agriculture that has documented ways that it's helping the planet. And we know also that these beneficial ingredients are helping our babies. And I love that just like dual purpose mission. So I'm curious, what is the long-term, you know, big lofty goal for you guys? What do you hope to accomplish over the long-term with Serenity Kids?

Serenity: Yeah, so our kind of product strategy is to grow our product line with baby Della. So she was born, you know, the day we launched for sale with our first two flavors. And now we have eight flavors on the market. In two weeks we'll have 10. Our bison and turkey flavors are launching in two weeks. And so we are expanding our pouch line. And then we're also gonna start experimenting with some different baby finger foods because basically I'm looking at what I'm buying to feed Della from other baby food companies. You know, and there's some foods out there and some formats really that I would like to be able to start offering.

And so really what I'm trying to do is healthify or, you know, make more nutrient dense options for a lot of the baby foods that are out there now, you know, different kinds of options. And then we really have a very strong desire to get into the children's food market. Because as you know, as a mom, you know that the foods that you can buy out there for kids, you know, it's like chicken nuggets and mac and cheese. And that's not what I wanna, you know, feed my kid for the most part. Maybe on occasion, but not very often. She hasn't eaten any of those things yet.

So, you know, we are really looking forward to working with manufacturers that they may not get it necessarily from a nutritional philosophy, but they can see the dollar signs, right? Parents want this stuff. They're desperate for healthier food to feed their kids. If you look around, there's actually a lot of innovation happening in the kids' food space. It just doesn't always work for whatever reason, you know. Whether they're not great business people or it tastes bad or the packaging wasn't right. You know, every consumer package goods company doesn't succeed. And so we are determined to be one of the ones that is going to. We're doing really well so far and have no reason to see that changing.

And so, you know, I'd really like to expand the market to be with older kids. And then, I mean, shoot, someone asked me yesterday, you know, "How do you feel about foods for the elderly?" And I'm, like, "Man, I go to my grandma's house and I see that she drinks those Ensure drinks", which if you look at the number one ingredient it's corn syrup. Like, it just makes my blood boil. Like, my grandma's 90 years old. She doesn't need to be eating, you know, trash. It's basically, you know, it's industrial food waste. She doesn't need to be eating that. I mean, it just makes me so upset. So you know, at some point possibly other adult options or, you know, who knows.

Joe: Yeah. Our stated mission is to make children healthier by offering nutrient dense foods that tastes great to kids and are convenient for parents. And there's just really nobody doing all three of those things. You know, like sometimes they're nutrient dense but they don't taste good. Or maybe they taste good, but they're hard to prepare, you know. But if we can make it easier for parents to feed their kids healthy, like that's the goal. And we wanna define healthy as nutrient dense. And that's one thing a lot of food companies make as

mistake is they call organic mac and cheese "healthy" because it doesn't have GMO ingredients, you know, and it's organically grown, but there's no nutrition in it. It's rice, flour and, you know, low-grade dairy. So it's, like, not very much nutrition in there.

So we wanna really... And it turns out, you know, really good meat and high fat and quality vegetables taste better too. They actually, if you don't use, if you skip the grains, you don't need the sugar if you've got the fat. And so we're really excited about finding a way to make it all taste good so kids genuinely like it, but it's also convenient.

Katie: You guys are so right. I think we need to change the entire conversation around baby food and kid's food. And I think of that every time I take my kids out to eat because like you said, I don't buy the kid options in my house. We make food from scratch in our house. But every time we go out to eat it's such a reminder of, like, the only thing that our society thinks that kids want to eat is chicken nuggets and pizza and hamburgers. And kids deserve better than that and kids are capable of so much more than that. So I love that you guys are part of evolving that conversation as well.

And I'm hopeful, like you said, there's so much demand for this with parents. I'm really am hopeful that we're gonna see a groundswell of movements and companies like you guys leading the charge and parents making better choices at the grocery store and at home and that we'll really see this turn around over the next decade or so. And I know that you guys share that hope as well.

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Katie: Also, I love to ask toward the end of interviews if there are any other things that people don't know or understand about your area of expertise in research? Because knowing you guys and knowing how passionate you are about this, I would say that you are definitely in the top 1% of people who know anything about baby food and baby nutrition in this country. So are there any other misunderstandings or things people just don't seem to understand?

Serenity: Yeah, you know, it's something that we couldn't really talk about at all before we had a baby who ate baby food, particularly our baby food was what are the effects on the family of a child who eats a super nutrient dense, low processed foods, low sugar, high vitamin, high fat diet? Because there's not a lot of evidence out there yet. You know, it's hard to do double blind studies on babies and feed them one, a bunch of sugar and one, you know, a bunch of liver and see how they live. And so now we can actually start talking about it. So our baby Della is 14 months old and she has been sick once, maybe twice. Actually she has had two colds.

Joe: For, like, two days.

Serenity :Yeah. She sleeps like a dream. I mean, it's spectacular. She has some... I'm gonna go there. So her poop is amazing. We have an in-office nanny for her and another co-worker's child and she's been in the nursery industry for two years. She's had one and two year olds in her classroom, preschool. And she said, "I thought that blowouts and constant illness were a part of childhood and a part of infancy, but these girls don't get sick and their poop is so normal. You know, like the diaper changes are easy. And I thought, you know, blowouts are normal and it turns out they're not."

So, you know, looking at...I know that having children can be stressful for some people and families. I mean, it changes your whole life, right? And so we wanna contribute in a way that makes the family more serene as Serenity Kids would imply, right? You know, I mean, when you've got a kid who's not having insulin spikes and sugar crashes as a result of eating a 90 gram of sugar breakfast, you know, the equivalent of, then you don't have as many meltdowns and you have nice naps and you have a kid who's healthy and who is just playful and, you know, inquisitive and curious like kids are. And they don't need to spend their time doing extra rest, recovering from illnesses, fighting things off, you know. They get to spend their time, like, enjoying themselves and enjoying you.

And, you know, we have such a great family life me, Joe and Della and we attribute part of it definitely to her nutrition, our nutrition. You know, from a mental health perspective, there's a direct correlation to diet and mental health. And, you know, that's one of the things that we're hoping to learn more and more about and even possibly help start, you know, a lot more awareness of the connection between diet and mental health. You know, so many kids now are put on mood altering medications. And I mean, it just breaks my heart knowing that, you know, if their parents had available foods and maybe had a little bit more knowledge of nutrient density that that kid might lead a happy serene life.

Joe: Yeah. The stats are quite scary. I mean, you know, people think of our health food or organic food as maybe a luxury or it's, like, a thing to do and we can afford it or like a premium product, but it's, and for, but anybody like Serenity and I who've had health issues knows it's not an option. Like we will be sick, we will be miserable. But you know, the people who can get by maybe. But babies, you know, one in five kids is being diagnosed obese. Babies are being diagnosed obese as young as 18 months old. One and nine will get diagnosed with diabetes at some point in their life. You know, one in eight will be given anti like mood altering drugs for mental or behavioral emotional disorders.

Serenity: While they're children.

Joe: As a kid. And these are all stats from the CDC. And, you know, so this is an urgent situation. And we know that sugar and food relate to all of those things. Not to mention everything Serenity said about sleep and poop and immunity and mood. But sugar is a direct correlation and healthy diet actually starts in infancy. There's a key thing called the flavor window, you know, right when babies first start eating foods the way they form their palette preferences. And if you give them only these sugary fruits that are in, you know, traditional baby foods, they're gonna be tainted towards sugar and they're not gonna wanna eat savory foods.

You know, a lot of parents talk about, "Oh my baby won't eat meat, my baby won't eat vegetables." There's, like, this anti vegetable meme that kids don't like vegetables. And I don't think it's actually true. I think it's that they were taught to like sugar really early on from these sugary baby foods. And if we introduce savory foods... Della will eat anything. Her favorite foods are olives. She loves, like, a Brian olives. She'll eat an entire lime like skin and all, like loves limes. You know, like, she'll... Liver broth is like... Serenity makes a beef liver broth, pure mixture that she just gulps down, like loves the taste of the liver broth. And, you know, and it's setting her up for a lifetime of being able to eat healthy instead of training kids to be sugar addicts from day one and then continuing feeding them more and more sugar.

Serenity: Yeah, I learned one little tip. I was on some, like, you know, one of those online courses and I recorded a little lesson and the woman suggested feeding her greens powder, like trying to feed your kids a little bit of greens powder to get them more acclimated to the bitter taste. Because you know, it's hard for babies to chew up a bunch of kale when you've only got four teeth or whatever. And so I'll never forget I had her in the high chair and I had my green powder out that I put in my smoothies, right? And I'm, like, "All right, all right, Della, here you go." And I had a little bit on the end of a spoon and I gave it to her. She made like... She tasted it and she smacked it around a little bit and she looked around, like, "Well, that's a different taste."

And then she looked at me and she reached for the spoon and she wanted some more. And I just kept giving it to her and she kept eating it and I was like, "What in the world? This is blowing my mind." Because I don't... I mean, I tasted it. It's bitter, so bitter. You know, and I had such a hard time learning bitter tastes because I was a sugar addict as a kid. You know, I was fed a lot of sugary things and lots of crackers and I would eat a bag of Doritos in a sitting. And, you know, it just wasn't something that I was used to seeing a kid do. And I'm just so grateful that we've had this... You know, I'm not grateful that we had the health crises that we did, but I'm grateful for what we learned as a result and how we're now hopefully, you know, leading the charge, like you said, and teaching other parents little ways that they can make their kids' lives so much better.

Joe: And it's worth the cost. You know, the fact is nutrient dense foods cost more. You know, a steak cost more than an Apple. A grass-fed steak costs more than a steak. And so we've had to really challenge the price of what they're charging for baby foods, which is anywhere from a dollar to \$2 a pouch for those organic fruit purees. You know, our meat and veggie pairs are \$3.99. It's double the cost. And, you know, it is something, it's worth it, you know, and the stats I showed before are quite scary.

You know, Healthline found that average toddler gets nine teaspoons of sugar a day and that's added sugar. They weren't even talking about fruit. They were just saying what's in just these toddler products with all this added sugar, nine teaspoons a day has more added sugar than I eat. These little toddlers are getting, and, you know, the animal studies suggest sugar is more addictive than cocaine. So the food industry is essentially really profiting from people being addicted to sugar. They're profiting off of grains being extremely cheap, terrible for the environment and actually no nutrition but very cheap to produce. And so, like, they keep trying to make these kids foods with organic sugar and grains because that's what they're used to. So we're really flipping that whole thing up and saying, "No, let's leave those out entirely. Let's focus on meat and veggies, the best sourcing, let's charge as much as we need to charge for it and trust that parents will pay." Because, you know, it's your baby.

Katie: Exactly. And I mean that's, people pay that much or more for kids' meals, you know, in restaurants. So if you're willing to pay that.. You know, put it in that same amount for something that's really actually nutrient dense is gonna get them a lot farther in life.

Real quick, I have a couple more questions for you guys, but where is Serenity Kids available? I know there will be links in the show notes and I know your website and Thrive Market. But where can people find it?

Joe: Yeah, we're in a lot of stores nationwide. We're in all Whole Foods nationwide. We're in a couple of other big chains in the Midwest. We're in Hy-Vee. We're in Harris Teeter and Kings on the East coast. We're up in Stop-N-Shop in the Northeast. We're in a lots of co-ops in independence. If we're not in your co-op, ask them about us and tell them to bring us in. We've had a lot of parents get our products held just by asking for it at the store. Because most stores haven't seen good baby food ever and they're dying for something new. So we're in about 1500 stores nationwide now and growing quickly. And, of course, you can find us on Amazon,

Thrive Market and on our website, can use the "Wellness Mama" discount. And that's where you're gonna get the best prices and the most access to the new products

Katie: And all those links you guys will be in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. So you can find them there. Couple last wrap up questions I love to ask. First being, if there is a book or number of books that have really impacted your life, if so, what they are and why?

Joe: I'm not a big reader, so this was easy for me because I read a book my sophomore year of high school called "The Peaceful Warrior," which probably if I read it now would be really silly. But at the time, it opened my mind to this idea that we're not stuck being any certain way, that we can constantly change and evolve ourselves particularly feelings. That we don't have to be angry or we don't have to be depressed. That we can decide that we're going to take a different attitude and enjoy life better. And that the most joyful thing in life is gonna be doing the right thing rather than doing the pleasurable thing that doing what feels right and fulfilling is what's going to lead me to most happiness. And that really set me on this path of social justice and saying, "Hey, even if it's harder, or even if it's not fun, even if it doesn't make as much money, I'm gonna be happier if I am making the world better and making myself better rather than just doing what's fun and easy."

Serenity: And for me, my book, kind of like Joe's "Peaceful Warrior" was "Ishmael" by Daniel Quinn. You know, I read it in my early 20s or maybe late teens for the first time. And I realized that this, you know, this beacon that we call civilization might actually not be the biggest beacon out there and that maybe wild peoples have a better life. And so that's one of them. And then for me, for this children's nutrition topic, the kind of foundation of my children's nutrition philosophy really came from the nourishing traditions book of "Baby and Child Care." That's one of the ones I read, just cover to cover during my summer of nerdism and realized so much about how Western Price was, you know, a pioneer in his field and really started talking about the dangers of processed foods and agricultural type byproducts really early on, you know, in the 1920s. And we're just now starting to see the repercussions of that. It's a great resource.

Katie: I love it. And lastly, any parting advice you wanna leave with our listeners today? It can be related to baby food or something entirely separate.

Serenity: For me, it's about parenting and it's something I've learned these last 14 months. And really it's just about being gentle with yourself. You know, all the podcasts and all the books and all the blogs, you know, you're gonna have high standards out there for, "Oh, I should feed my baby, you know, liver and bone broth and sweet potatoes every day." And you know, as a parent, like, you can't always do that. Even we don't always do that. I thought for sure I would at least make some of Della's own pureed baby food. But I haven't, you know. I mean, I feed her Serenity Kids. And, you know, it's just, do the best you can with what you've got. You're doing a great job.

Joe: In that vein, my advice would be that if there's one thing you do as a parent, it's avoid shame. Both shame to yourself as Serenity is describing. Nobody's perfect but also shame to the kid. You know, like had a lot of

behavior challenges. I did a lot of things that adults didn't like. And I took on this idea that I'm bad and that I'm, you know, fundamentally worthless and incapable. And that is gonna take a lifetime to undo. And so obviously we need to redirect children's behavior and we need to help them learn healthy behaviors and lifestyle. And we just have to be really careful that we never instill the message that there's anything wrong with them, that they're bad or that they're wrong in any way. And so to me, that's the most important thing. That no matter what you do as a parent, you know, that you combat the shame that society puts on kids and avoid shaming them yourself.

Katie: I absolutely love that. I say that to my kids often too because I don't feel like that was something I was given early. I know my parents loved me, but that was never really reinforced. And so I tell my kids all the time that I love them absolutely unconditionally. And there's literally nothing they could ever do that would change that. I just wanna make sure they have that anchor. I think you're so right, both of you. That's a perfect place to end. You guys are so easy to interview. That was amazing. I love both of you. I love what you're doing and I'm so grateful to get to be part of this journey with you. Thank you for your time today.

Serenity: Yeah. Thank you so much. This has been a blast.

Joe: Thank you, Katie, for all you do and your six kids.

Katie: And thanks to all of you for listening and sharing one of your most valuable resources, your time, with all three of us today. We're so grateful that you did and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama" podcast.

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