Episode 13: Baby Steps for Eating Real Food

Katie: Katie, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Katie Kimball: Hey, other Katie. I always love talking with you. Thanks for having me.

Katie: Yeah, this is going to be so fun and especially because I feel like you’re such an amazing resource and your blog, Kitchen Stewardship, is an incredible online resource especially for moms and especially, you have so many good budget-friendly tips and just preparing real food with real-life time and budget, so I can’t wait to dive in. I know a lot of people listening maybe are wanting to switch to a healthier lifestyle or are starting to try to make those steps and maybe are overwhelmed. I know you and I both ... This has been a journey for us, and certainly, we didn’t do it in a day. What are some of your best baby steps for switching to real food?
Katie Kimball: Absolutely, it's a good place to start, and I think ... I mean, that's what I try to build Kitchen Stewardship around, as I described it yesterday in a talk, is helping moms not let their heads explode when they look at all the things they want to change, so you have to start ... I mean, the first step is to just give yourself some grace. No one is perfect. I think the mental attitude is going to make or break any attempt that you have. If your mental attitude is, “Oh my goodness, I need to change everything, including my life, and do it all,” you're like 90% sure you're going to fail. You're setting yourself up for failure.

I think baby steps is ... That's the first baby step is baby steps. It sounds silly, but it's so true that the mental attitude and how you approach things is really important. Then, I would say to examine your life, and your day, and your food, and your eating habits, and stuff. Look for something that would be minimal effort, maximum impact, so something that's not going to overwhelm you with this one step that just takes not very much time and not very much effort, but yet, it's something that's going to impact your family every day, right?

Like if you eat pizza once a month, pizza is not the first thing you should make over because you're not going to feel that success often enough. If you eat cereal every single morning for breakfast, maybe breakfast is something that you can tackle, or maybe you just say, “Twice a week, twice a week, we're not going to eat cereal. We're going to make homemade meals, and I'm just going to batch-plan it and figure out something we can do instead of cereal.”

Then, twice a week, you can get a routine. You can practice it. You can see and feel the results. There may not be physical results when I say feel, but just feel the accomplishment, so it's got to be something, and then give yourself that success, and then do something else, right, and some other things. That's a philosophical baby step, but it's about ... For every person, it will be different, whether it's switching out one processed food that you buy to a homemade or going organic on just lettuce because salad is something that you eat every day. Then, up that game to making homemade dressings, so just one thing at a time and trying to make sure that you keep yourself balanced, that it's not something that's going to take a ton of your time and not something that's going to completely max out your budget either. It's just finding that balance. That's always what I try to do at Kitchen Stewardship.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. I'd love to know. Just give the listeners an idea of what a typical day looks like for you because you are obviously a mom of four, but you also run a blog, so you tow that line between stay-at-home mom and working mom, and you're probably juggling both of those jobs. Can you give us an idea of what a typical day looks like for you both with your food prep and your healthier lifestyle?
Katie Kimball: There is no typical day like I laughed when I read that question that you sent over because there is no good answer. There's no typical day, but there is a lot. I mean, there’s a lot to balance. My good friend just said to me, "I keep thinking of you as a stay-at-home mom because you’re home, but like you're totally not like you're working many, many hours a week. Like you really are a working mom, but you're home, so it's weird." I said, "Yeah, that's how I feel too like it is weird."

I'm home. I'm here for my kids, but I spend way too much time sitting on my ... behind, in front of the computer. That needs to change. I need to get a standing desk, but as far as food prep, I thought my first step was, “Well, I spend at least an hour or two in the kitchen every day between prep, eating, and cleaning up.” Then, I'm like, "Oh, no because we eat three times. No, that's got to be more like three or four hours.” That's probably why I always feel like my to-do list are never getting done because it does ... There's no bones about it like you cannot do real food in 5 minutes a day. Forget it. You just can't, unless you have a lot of money to pay someone else to do it for you. That's not going to happen for me.

For us, every breakfast, except for ... We have once a week cereal day, which is just for fun. It's the 80/20 lifestyle thing, but the other 6 days for breakfast through, we're making something homemade, whether it's ... Like I make ... I had some sort of healthy quick bread type thing that I've made or a simple, simple oatmeal. We do a lot of just quick egg hashes or eggs with ... I love making pancakes. Like once a week, we'll spend like an hour making pancakes, and they let ... We have leftovers for another day. Throw an egg in with that. Not in, on it, but next to it, and so we have a little bit of a balanced breakfast, but that definitely takes some time.

Lunches are almost always leftovers from the night before plus homemade yogurt like homemade yogurt is definitely a staple for us that we just ... It's nice to have one thing that we can just, “Yup. What’s for lunch? Okay. Well, we got yogurt for starters,” and then I’ll think about what else the refrigerator is going to spit out at us. Then, dinners are pretty much always homemade like if we have leftovers, that’s great like that’s a break for me, but otherwise, there’s something to do homemade like people talk about a half-hour meal, and I’m like, “A half hour?” Like that’s a really ... That’d be a really good day for me because I spend at least 10 minutes just cutting up the raw vegetables that we dip in our homemade ranch and eat, which is why I pull my kids in and get them to help because it just became almost impossible to keep up on all that.
Then, there’s dishes. There’s always dishes somewhere in the sink, in the dishwasher, drying in the dry rack, so that was a … That’s not a very fun perspective, but it’s worth it. It’s definitely worth it, but again, there’s just no … There’s no denying that it takes time. Every night, I have to check my meal plan and see what I need to prep for the next day. Some mornings, I wake up and go, “Oops, I forgot to prep something. Now, I need to tweak. I can’t do this slow-cooker meal. Maybe I can do the same thing in the instant pot, which has been saving me lately.” I think about food. I have to think about food all day because it’s like, “Okay. We finished this meal. They’re going to be hungry in 3 hours. What’s next?”

Katie: Exactly.

Katie Kimball: “What do I need to do to make sure that the next meal is possible?” We don’t have a lot of … We don’t have options sitting around in our house like I don’t buy a lot of junk food or processed food, so if I feel lazy and I don’t want to jump through hoops to make real food, it’s like too bad. I don’t give myself backups, which is my insurance plan, right? If I have a bunch of frozen pizzas in the freezer, I’d probably make use of them on a long day, which all days feel long, so I just don’t. I just don’t have them, so it’s like, “Well, my cheat meal might be scrambled eggs or gluten-free pasta with roast … or ground beef that I’ve already cooked in the freezer and a jar of organic spaghetti sauce. Like if that’s a cheat meal, then we’re still doing pretty well. That’s still real food, so generally, I feel pretty good about that, but it’s an all-day mental kind of thing.

Katie: I definitely understand where you’re coming from on that, and I love the tip about eating leftovers for lunch. We did that a lot also because I feel like that’s a hard meal if you make the switch from processed food and you’re not buying just loaves of pre-made bread and sandwich meats, and the normal lunch fair. It’s a harder switch than people realize, and the same with breakfast. We don’t really do cereal either, and so sometimes, we’ll do leftovers for breakfast, and that does definitely help.

I know you probably did this too. I’ll try to make ahead at least enough that I know I will have leftovers, and then serve that for breakfast or lunch, but I also can sympathize on the whole there’s no quick option.” If I slip, up and don’t look at the meal plan, and let it get till 5:00 at night, I may not have anything for dinner, and we might be eating something, like you said, frozen spaghetti out of the freezer an hour later when I can defrost it, but the instant pot have saved my butt too a lot recently.

Katie Kimball: Yeah. For sure. I think our cheat lunch, if I don’t have any like leftovers for lunch, we’re like, “Oh my gosh, we have to leave for preschool drop-off in 15 minutes.” It’s sliced cheese, gluten-free crackers, frozen peas, and that yogurt and frozen fruit always saves us. The gluten-free crackers are processed, but they’re acceptable ingredients, so I feel like, again, for a cheat meal, we’re still doing pretty well.
Katie: Exactly. Really, I love that you follow that 80/20 principle too because I feel like you can also make yourself so crazy with trying to be 100% perfect with diet that you undo the benefits of having that perfect diet to begin with. You mentioned yogurt, which you have some great resources for making, and I’ll make sure to link to those. What are some other staple foods in your kitchen? Obviously, homemade yogurt is a big one. What are some other foods that you guys always just keep on hand or that you’ll prepare very often?

Katie Kimball: Yeah, we have … We eat a lot of soup, so chicken stock is always in the freezer and often in the fridge. I think I default to soup not necessarily because we love soup, but because it’s so easy to make a big pot and have multiple meals of leftovers like we were just talking like there’s … It’s guaranteed leftovers if I make soup, so we have it. Plus, bone broth is so healthy, so it’s like win-win on the soup. We end up with a lot of soup, which drives my kids nuts when they’re like between the ages of 3 and 5. They all go through this “I hate soup” phase, and they’re like, “Soup? No,” and I’m like, “Yeah, sorry. Like you’re a Kimball, you’re stuck with us.”

Then, as far as like in the cupboard, we have a lot of … We make sure we have nuts, and dried fruit on hand, and cheese, and stuff like that for those moments. “What’s for snack, mom?” “Well, we have nuts. We have dried fruit. We have cheese.” There’s always whole fruit around that kids can grab. I can’t say I have a lot of things that we make homemade that we always have around other than chicken stock and yogurt, but it’s fairly common to have something homemade. It just switches up, the homemade muffins in the freezer or something like that.

The busier I get, definitely the less I actually make and the more I hand out the ingredients. “Here’s some cut celery. You know where the peanut butter is. You know where the raisins are. [Inaudible 00:10:56] is your snack day.” I didn’t have to make that and wash the food processor, or wash a pan, or whatever, but there’s always something to eat, I feel like. I always tell my kids. I’m like, “We may not have 20 choices, and the choices might be the same 10 days in a row, but we don’t starve. There’s always food here.”

Katie: Exactly. We do the same thing. We don’t do snacks very often. I try to feed the kids enough of meals that they stay full for a little while, but at least once a day, especially with the boys when they’re growing. It’s like, “Mom, I’m hungry. What can I have?” I always have this refrain of like, “There’s carrots, there’s celery, there’s cucumber in the fridge. You can put peanut butter on those or find some protein.” I’m definitely like you. I’m not going to go make a full meal because they’re hungry for a snack.

Katie Kimball: No, you just can’t.

Katie: No.
Katie Kimball: You can’t.

Katie: Especially with us. It would be shorter to cook and spend the whole day making special request snacks.

Katie Kimball: Yup. We have a lot of smoothies too. I should say that. I think my Gabe had like 4 helpings of smoothies this morning, and I thought. “Okay. I got to cut you off now, but I’m glad you like the smoothie,” so that’s a good one for a snack, or a lunch, or dinner [crosstalk 00:12:04] those bad days.

Katie: Yeah. Do you put the yogurt in the smoothies as well for the probiotics?

Katie Kimball: I do. Yeah. I’ll use the homemade yogurt, especially like if I have a rough batch that’s a little runny, then we have lots of smoothies that week, or if I strain it to thicken it up a little bit, then the whey goes in the smoothie. I always have frozen fruit like we pick strawberries and blueberries in the summer as much as we possibly can stuff in the freezer. Like this morning, smoothie had frozen bananas and frozen strawberries, and then a number of random things like we add kelp powder for the iodine, and probiotics, and collagen. It’s the way to just cram a bunch of nutrition in there and some greens usually.

Katie: Yeah, and kids really do seem to like smoothies. I feel like I can get a lot in some of these and get away with it. I don’t know if you guys have it where you live, but I’ll share this tip for readers is there’s a coop called “Azure Standard,” and I think that’s the website, azurestandard.com. They also have organic frozen fruit in bulk, so when we run out of our summer stock-up of fruit, I’ll order from them. I think it’s like ... You can get 10 pounds of frozen berries for usually like in $20 to $30 range, so it’s a ... That’s been a savior for smoothies for us. If anybody has been in that area, I think the website is azurestandard.com, and you can look up, but it’s like a coop with a truck that they drop off, and so I’ll leave that in the show notes as well. I love that. Having frozen fruit on hand for smoothies definitely saves time for sure.

Katie Kimball: Yeah. If you can buy as far as budget-wise the red tape bananas like when the bananas are already going bad, so we’ll get those, and then just peel them, and break them in half, and freeze them in one flat layer in a big gallon bad, and then I just crack them apart when I throw them in the smoothie. That’s good because the banana makes the smoothie. That always adds the sweetness that can cover everything else that we put in there.
Katie: Yeah, definitely. Another thing, I actually was going to call and just talk to you about your experience as a friend, but we can just do it on the podcast instead. You mentioned that you guys recently did a Whole30, you and your husband. I know this has gotten really popular lately, the idea of the Whole30. Can you explain what that is and what your experience was?

Katie Kimball: Sure. The Whole30 … The diet is intended to remove food groups that can promote inflammation, so you remove all grains, all dairy, all legumes, and all sweeteners, including stevia and non-calorie sweeteners because the another arm of the Whole30 or intent of the Whole30 is to smash your cravings. Not only do you cut grains, but you also cut any baking, so like any grain-free baking. Even if all the ingredients are Whole30-approved, you’re not supposed to bake because that act of baking and smelling the things baking can like trigger, supposedly trigger your cravings and keep those up.

For 30 days, which is enough, the number of days that you need to really make something a habit, for 30 days, you do no cravings, so you don’t do like junk food like chips even … Again, even if all the ingredients are Whole30 compliant, you’re not supposed to have things like chips. All those things where like once you start eating them, you can’t stop, those addictive things, you’re supposed to cut all those out, cut out all, again, sweeteners just to tell your tongue like, “You don’t need this. You don’t need all these sweet stuff.” Let’s back your palette off of sweet and teach it to find the natural sweetness in things like fruits and roasted vegetables, caramelized onions, stuff like that. Things that with our American tongues, we don’t even notice the sweetness in those things.

The Whole30 tends to help a lot of people lose weight without being hungry because there’s no quantity restrictions, which is really nice. We actually had two of our friends did it with my husband. I didn’t do the whole thing like I didn’t cut dairy because I just … I don’t know. I just couldn’t. I can’t do it. I’m still nursing. I need my yogurt and my cheese, but I did cut grains and sweeteners. For me, it’s still a very good reset. We try to do this once a year and call it … It’s really good reset of our gut. It’s a reset of our palette and of our habits.

Last year, when my husband did a successful Whole30, he ended up not going back to any sort of candy at all because he has learned about himself that it’s all or none. If he would have candy sometimes, it’s too hard to figure out when should be sometimes and when should be not, and so he didn’t have any candy until my mother-in-law brought over a big bag of his favorites for Halloween, and I was like, “Really? Do you not know he hasn’t eaten candy in 8 months? Thank you very much.” That unfortunately started the downward slide through the holiday season. Once it came to January, he was like, “Oh my gosh, like I’m totally noshing on candy all the time again. I have to do another Whole30.”
For him, it really works to break the cravings. It definitely promotes weight loss for him, I think, in a healthy way. Again, he’s never hungry because you can still have nuts and dried fruit. What I love about it is, number one, it forces me to meal plan because there is no grab a box of gluten-free spaghetti from the cupboard. You can’t even add rice to the meal. When you have like a meal, you’re thinking, “Oh, we need one more thing. Let’s throw in some rice or whatever.” There is none of that. You have to … “I need one more thing. Let’s cut some Brussels sprouts.” I end up meal planning a lot better because you have to, and I end up buying way more vegetables because instead of a meat, and a grain, and a veggie maybe in a meal, it’s a meat, and a veggie, and a veggie, and a veggie.

We diversify our veggies a lot. I always get back into parsnips, and rutabaga, and fennel, and bok choy, and a lot of things that I … after the farmer’s market ends in the summer. When we go into fall, I get a little boring on my veggies, and I end up with just a lot of like frozen broccoli, and green beans, and peas because they’re easy, and I don’t have to worry about the perishableness, and using them in time, and everything. Then, if we get around to February or so, we’ll do a Whole30, and then I’m like, “Okay. Let’s plan this better. I can get the veggies and plan them out.” For me, I love it. I end up roasting a lot of veggies and playing with spices. It really stretches my diversification of our meals. It’s great.

Katie: Yeah. We’ve done one in the past too, and I noticed that as well, just the focus on vegetable, which is nice because like you said, you can eat as much as you want. When you’re eating Brussels sprouts and cabbage, it’s not a big deal. You can truly eat as much as you want. I feel like even though … I’ve never put our kids on a Whole30 because they pretty much eat grain-free and only like raw-fermented dairy anyway, but I just feel like even with them, I focus more on vegetables when I’m doing the meal planning for that kind of a focus. Speaking of meal planning, you have an awesome eBook called “Better than a Box,” and it’s basically real food alternatives to pantry staples. Can we talk about that, how you created these alternatives, and what are some of the most popular recipes in that eBook?

Katie Kimball: Yes. This book was a fun. It was a very long process and a labor of love for sure. It goes beyond just the pantry staples, but into how you use them. Thinking of a box like a box of Stove Top Stuffing that someone might use to make another recipe. What I started noticing is that a lot of the recipes that I used to use before I switched to real food would be … They were homemade. It took time to make them. They were a recipe with [mushroom 00:19:53] ingredients, but some of the ingredients themselves will be processed like a can of cream of mushroom soup or like that box of Stove Top Stuffing or something. I think a lot of people run into that where their favorite recipes … that do.
It feels like real food because you’re making it and it’s homemade, but then you’re looking. You’re like, “Wait a minute, like this isn’t real food. This doesn’t count. That stinks. What can I do?” I wanted to teach people how to remake those kinds of recipes, taking out the processed foods and being able to make those like parts of the ingredients from scratch. Again, it’s a little bit beyond just like the pantry staples, but how to mix them together and how to re … I call it “reverse engineering a recipe.”

I actually ask readers to send in their favorites that fit that criteria, their favorite … I get a lot of casseroles, a lot of things with cream of whatever, soups, and some desserts that included stuff like pudding mix. They’re like, “Oh, it’s all … Like all these 7 ingredients, 6 more real food, and then pudding mix,” but I love this dessert. It’s so good. I can use succinate or whatever, honey as a sweetener, but I can’t figure out how to get rid of this pudding mix with its like 20 unidentifiable ingredients.

That’s what I set out to do. I set out to figure out how to replace things in recipes, and so we … There’s a lot of casseroles in there and a couple different methods to make the cream of whatever soups. That’s definitely the pinnacle of it is for people to help people get rid of that particular product because it’s such a reliant … something that people really rely on for their family-friendly home-style recipes that their palettes love.

Then, I was able to get rid of Velveeta, which is another common ingredient in your casseroles, that creaminess of the cheese. It doesn’t really work to just throw in shredded cheddar because you lose the creaminess, so you have to do some stuff with like cottage cheese and some other little tricks to add the creaminess. Then, I would remake the recipe, and I’d send it back to the original person who sent me their recipe, and so it was like a huge task because they would have to … They’d make it and give it to their family who loved the original recipe, and I’d be like on pins and needles like, “How is it going to go? Is it going to be okay? Are they going to hate it and say, ‘Oh, like this is totally not like the original?’”

It was really edifying because most of them like some of them might fail, but most of them that people would come back and be like, “I can’t even believe it. My kids ate it, and they loved it. My husband said it was better than the original.” I was like, “Yes, score.” That’s what we did, and it’s a massive book. It’s like 200 pages, and so it not only has those recipes ready to go, but the first like 80 pages are teaching the process of how to reverse engineer stuff, so that people have the skills to take their own family favorites and remake them for whole foods.
Katie: That’s awesome. Yeah. I know. I make a lot of meals for friends when they have babies, and so many of the classic meals for that rely on cream of mushroom, or cream of celery, or cream of some kind of soup, and so I love that you have such easy switches for all of those. I’ll make sure to definitely include a link to that eBook in show notes because you do have some amazing recipes in it. Thank you so much for your time and being here today. I can’t wait till our next episode. We’re going to talk about real food shopping tips and tricks, which you have so many great tips and tricks to share. Please, I hope everyone will join us again next time for that, and thank you so much, Katie, for being here.

Katie Kimball: Fantastic. Thank you too, Katie.