Episode 747: Picky Eating: Root Causes and What Parents Can Do About It With Katie Kimball
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Hello, and welcome to the Wellness Mama podcast. I’m Katie from wellnessmama.com, and this episode is all about picky eating, the root causes, and what parents can do about it. I'm here with Katie Kimball, who is a national voice of healthy kids cooking, as a former teacher, two-time TEDx speaker, a writer, a mom of four, who founded the Kids Cook Real Food course, which was recommended by The Wall Street Journal as one of the best online cooking classes for kids. Her blog, Kitchen Stewardships, helps families stay healthy without going crazy, and she's on a mission to connect families around healthy food, teach every child to cook, and help families instill important life skills. And in this episode, we talk about the true causes of picky eating that actually have nothing to do with food. We talk about how to resolve this outside the kitchen, what it can actually point to, how to figure out specifically what might be going on with your child, and so much more.
related to this topic. I actually learned a lot in this episode, and I know you will too. So let's join Katie. Katie Kimball, welcome back.

Katie: Oh, Katie, it's always good to see you.

Katie: It's fun because we're friends in real life, but we don't get to hang out on podcasts very much. And I knew I wanted to have you back on specifically to talk about a topic that I feel like is really important to a lot of parents and doesn't seem to have a lot of good solutions out there. And I feel like you are really working on bridging that gap. So just start off broad, most parents listening have probably experienced at least a phase of picky eating with at least one of their kids. But why are we seeing so much picky eating right now? Is this on the rise? It seems like there are a lot more picky eaters than even when I was a kid.

Katie: I think it is definitely on the rise, and statistics will reflect that. You know, statistics take a little bit of time to catch up. I have a feeling that the pandemic will continue to increase, like further even increase, picky eating because of all the stress that kids experience. And so that, quite honestly, Katie, is one of the reasons that picky eating may be increasing is because kids are feeling stress both at school and sometimes at the table. You know, if parents are talking about world events or if parents are having conflict, kids feel that tone of voice. They reflect the facial expressions we make. And what's one of the, you know, things that stress does is it reduces our appetite. Because if you're stressed out, your body doesn't want to take time to digest. And so any time a child is feeling stressed, that's automatically going to physiologically reduce their appetite. And for a lot of kids, you know, avoiding eating can actually be a stress response because they want control over something, anything in their world. And food is one of those things that they know they can control. So stress is a big deal.

And then I think your audience would understand this more than most, that our overall toxic load is increasing, especially in recent decades, with just everything that we're putting into the environment and on and in our bodies. And we've got one body, you know, and so the toxic load is like one bucket filling up. And when it spills over, we're seeing a lot more highly sensitive kids emotionally. We're seeing a lot more food sensitivities, and we're seeing a lot more sensory sensitivities as well. You know, kids that are really sensitive to sound or light or touch and texture, right? Like the scratchy tag thing. And that definitely impacts eating because eating uses all of our senses at once. So if any of your senses or your kid's senses is kind of running too high or is overwhelmed by anything, that can absolutely put a huge roadblock between the child and the food. And then when it comes to, again, food sensitivities, our kids might be running at a low level of pain all the time. And they can't articulate that eating is uncomfortable, but it is. And so, their body just kind of pushes food away. You'll notice all of these have nothing to do with the food. It's all about the kid and their body and what's going on in their environment.

Katie: Which makes total sense. And I know that's what your TEDx talk is about as well. I'll make sure if it's possible that we'll link to that in the show notes because that one was phenomenal. But this makes me think if it's not just about the food, then the solution also is probably not just about the food. So I guess we can kind of take multiple approaches here, but starting with if parents already have picky eaters, how can they start to address that and help the child resolve it?

Katie: Parents just have to put on those detective hats. And this is not an easy solution. There's no like, do this, one, two, three, ABC, that's going to apply to all kids. Because if the root cause is still happening, right, you could be doing a lot of great things at the table. But if your child has an underlying food sensitivity, if they have a sensory sensitivity, and even we're seeing a lot of kids nowadays who have weak jaw muscles, weak tongue muscles, chewing and swallowing is an insanely difficult process that we don't think about anymore because
we're pretty good at it, right? We've been doing it three to 12 times a day for however many years we've been alive.

But just the ability, if you think about, so like, imagine putting a cracker in your mouth and chewing it, and how do you get it from your mouth to swallow? You actually have to do some what's called tongue tip lateralization. So the tip of your tongue has to move that food to your back molars so that they can chew. And then it further has to gather up all that food, scoop it to the top of your mouth, and kind of swoosh it back into your throat. Incredibly complicated when you break it down. And so, if a child has any sort of weakness in their tongue, if as they were, you know, weaning from breast or bottle, moving to food as they're moving through different kinds of food, like mushy baby food. And I always have to talk about pouches because pouches have absolutely overtaken the baby food aisle. Since you know, you and I, our oldest are about the same age, about 17, 18 years old. Back then, it was mostly spoon-fed, right? We'd spoon-feed our kids, or we'd give them food, and they'd get it all over their faces and their hair. Now, baby food aisles, I think, are about 90% pouches, which means that a child is not seeing or smelling that food often before it hits their tongue. They might not be getting it all over their face and hair and elbows, which is all actually part of learning to eat, is touching that food to really weird places on your body. If kids have skipped some of those steps, right? Inadvertently, no parent says, gosh, I want my kid to chew and swallow wrong. No, we're just trying to feed our kids the best we can with what food marketers are giving us, right? So this is all inadvertent, but some kids are missing some of these steps in learning to eat. And it really interferes with the types of food that they're able to be comfortable with, whether that's a texture or a taste thing.

So we got to put our detective hats on and think about what might really be going on. Reducing stress at the table, always a winner, right? You can never go wrong with reducing stress at the table or in life. So I always say parents, like, try to keep the adult conversations for after bedtime, right? That's a really, really simple rule to institute between any adults in the household is keep those adult conversations about the news or about current events or about kids schooling post bedtime. Talk about good things at the table. Talk about fun things. You know, if school is stressful for a kid, then talk about school right after school. You know, or in the morning at any time other than at that dinner table, even though it feels like the best time to do it, right? That feels like when we should just connect with our kids on all things possible. But, particularly if you're working on a picky eating problem, any stressful topic is one that you want to leave the table for sure. And there's, I mean, there's a bunch of other things, but we'll start there, and then we'll see where we go in our conversation here.

Katie: Well, and even as a mom, I feel like I can resonate with that suggestion because I know I feel more stressed eating if the kids are bombarding me with questions about all kinds of stuff while I'm trying to eat. And so, it makes sense that kids would have that same experience. And it seems like one of the initial steps, if people still have babies and toddlers, is to make better choices with how they initially start eating. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but I know for mine, I loved putting them in a highchair and giving them teeny bits of food and letting them figure out how to pick it up and put it in their mouth, which admittedly was super messy. But it also, as a byproduct, entertained them for a while because they weren't good at it at first. And they learned to use their touch and their pinch reflex and got it all over their bodies, of course. But it kept them busy for a while. And it was a fun interaction time.

I love the suggestion of keeping the dinner table not stressful and having that kind of be like a sacred space that's fun and that's connected. I don't know if you have any suggestions for that specifically, but a couple that I love doing, I have a running list of my phone of kind of questions that lead to connection. And I'll often ask one of those at dinner. And they'll be like fun, experiential questions or like, what would you do questions or this or that type questions. But it usually leads to really fun conversations amongst the kids. And we try to do our gratitude at dinner of saying things we're grateful for, which I think in general, gratitude, of course, has so
many benefits beyond mealt ime. But those are a couple of suggestions that I have. Do you have any other suggestions for nurturing that environment at the dinner table? And for things we can do outside of the meal environment that can also help reduce that stress load, since this seems like that's a huge factor.

Katie: Yeah, I just want to kind of reflect and confirm the gratitude. We know that giving gratitude, you know, science tells us that that actually puts us into the rest and digest mode. So anything you can do with gratefulness at the beginning of a meal is a really good idea. One of the strategies we use, we call it our three Ls, and it’s when did you laugh today? What did you learn? And how did you love someone else? And so, everyone at the table just goes around and talks about that. And those are pretty, especially when did you laugh today? Ideally, you know, they tell the story, and then everyone is laughing at the table. And that, again, helps your body get into that rest and digest. And obviously, that's the opposite of the stressful mode.

I think a lot of kids who are picky eaters are stressed about food. You know, likely they've been asked to eat a little more or have a few bites of broccoli to earn dessert. We try not to, right? We parents, we know maybe we shouldn't do those things. But I think our stress as parents can be apparent in our faces when we're at the table and we're talking about food. And so, there's a lot of natural stress as soon as the food hits the plate for our kids with more picky eating tendencies.

And so, one way to sort of circumvent that is to use a family-style serving strategy or technique, right? Where instead of you plating the food for the child, the children, even as young as three- and four-year-olds are plating for themselves. This does, this helps a lot because first of all, if you're plating the food for the child, you're not really sure how to gauge their hunger on any given day, especially when we think of our toddlers. Oh my goodness, like they can skip a dinner and then they eat like a quintuple lunch the next day. So we just never really know what they're going to need. So this allows the children to serve based on their own feeling of hunger at that moment. It also gives an exposure point, especially if you're passing the food around at the table. Even if the child says no thank you to a certain dish, they have kind of touched that dish. Their thumb might have gone over the edge and, you know, mushed into the mashed potatoes that they didn't really want. They're getting the smell, the aroma of that food. And all of that sort of serves to inoculate the child to that food for the next time and helps them further make friends with it. So literally in their brains, they're getting these exposure points that are speeding up the time to which they might be willing to put that in their mouth, even if they don't put it in their mouth. You can use other little strategies like letting them serve you to further increase that exposure.

And then, of course, working with food in the kitchen. I'm a huge fan of that at Kids Cook Real Food. But that serves not only to increase the exposure point, but also to reduce that stress. Because if you're...someone else or even just washing the vegetables, right? Maybe you've got a three-year-old and you think, my three-year-old can't really do anything in the kitchen, Katie, but they can play in the water, and they can wash the vegetables and they know that they're not going to be required to eat it. So those kids who feel the stress when they see like, oh my goodness, the food has gone on the plate. Their subconscious is kind of telling them you might be required to eat this and that's not okay, right? And their stress goes up. So when they're serving themselves, that really, really helps. And when they're away from the table in any way. It helps because there's no pressure to eat. And so, they feel they're just able to approach food with more curiosity and kind of make friends with their food.

One phrase I want parents to start implementing right away is this one. You don't have to eat that. And it may take some time for kids who might have heard, finish your meal, right, or take three more bites or any of these kind of any phrase that asks a child to eat something is not in our lane in The Division of Responsibility by Ellen Satter, she says, you know, kids need to be in charge of whether they eat anything and how much they eat, which makes so much sense. We can't actually respectfully force them to chew and swallow. So we ought not
require anything to go into their mouth. Our job as parents is to decide what is on the table, where food is eaten, and when dinner or lunch or breakfast or whatever, when our eating events happen. And so, if you can think about those as two different lanes, bad things always happen if we let kids cross into our lane or if we cross into their lane. So really, really important to start using that phrase, you don't have to eat that. And again, it may take some time to unravel the neural pathways that have already been potentially formed by kids who have been required to eat in the past. But when you know better, you do better. So that's an incredibly important phrase to reduce stress at the table and help kids make friends with their food.

Katie: I will make sure to link to Kids Cook Real Food in the show notes because that's an invaluable tool. And I do find anecdotally, the more kids are involved in the preparation of the food, the more likely they are to want to choose to try it. But to your point, I love that you spoke to really respecting their autonomy. And you're right. We cannot physically force them to eat anything. And probably statistically, I would guess it makes it much more likely for them to want to eat it if they aren't forced to eat it. And I think that not forcing and or the flip side being not forbidding is really important because I was aware of this of not wanting to create unhealthy mindsets with my kids around food in either direction. And I knew if I forbid certain foods or labeled them as bad versus just having a conversation about how different foods nourish our body and letting them choose. But if I created these dichotomies, it was actually likely to make the, quote, bad foods seem more enticing because they were forbidden and make them likely to resist foods I actually wanted them because they felt like they were losing their autonomy. And so, I love that phrase and that honoring of their autonomy. And I think often when we do that, we'll be blown away at how much kids respond actually really well when we honor their autonomy.

Katie: Yeah, I like to call it agency. I actually did my honors thesis in college because I'm an educator by trade on agency in literacy acquisition, meaning when kids have choice in how they learn to read, they actually learn to read better and faster and more effectively. And it works the same way with eating. When kids have agency or when they have some choice or control over their situation, as they are learning to eat, they learn to eat in a much better and more healthy manner. And that would be a good phrase for parents to incorporate, too, is learning to eat. I don't like the words picky eaters because especially if kids hear that phrase coming out of my mouth, that puts a label on them. It kind of puts them in a box. And what kid is going to grab the hammer and bash their way out of the picky eater box, right? So we want to remove the label picky eater from our language and use sort of that growth mindset from Carol Dweck and say, honey, you're just learning to eat. It's okay, right? Your taste buds aren't grown up yet. Maybe you'll like that when you're older, or you just probably don't appreciate that yet.

All of those phrases, especially that word yet, are incredibly powerful to build our kids' growth mindset that like, oh, you know, and I've even heard stories of like a four-year-old saying to her grandma, because that's a tough generation, right? They like, the grandma generation tends to like to say things to kids like, you need to eat that or try it, you might like it. All of these are more archaic phrases. And this little four-year-old had, her mother was working on the picky eating situation for a couple of weeks. And she said, oh, Grandma, I'm just still learning to eat. It's okay. I thought that's perfect when our kids can take that into themselves and kind of make it their own.

Katie: That's so precious. I love that. And on that note, I'd love to build into a little bit of discussing, are there other steps we can take, understanding that our kids do have agency about their own food choices and respecting that, to help them take ownership of their health and nutrition and let those choices become internally motivated and something that's foundational to them versus externally given from us?

Katie: This is definitely one of the hardest tasks as parents, right? And you name it, whether it's your food, your faith, the way you feel about education, how do we help our kids take ownership? And I feel like all of
parenting is just this sort of gradual release of responsibility, right? From toddlerhood to the teenage years is where we're constantly giving them a little more and doing a little less ourselves. I think habits are one of the sort of understated steps to that is what is in your house? Are you eating vegetables at every meal? I can remember when my two oldest kids were nine and 12, they started taking one meal every other week that they made, and they were just going to make pizza all school year, same pizza recipes so that they could gain mastery. And it was so funny. The first week they made pizza with, homemade pizza, with the side vegetable, like a, you know, frozen steamed broccoli or whatever it was. And I thought, oh, that's interesting because most people just have pizza. But I think we had such a habit of always serving a side vegetable with a meal that that's what they thought they needed to do, right? And that's the power of habits is when they're so ingrained that they're not even really at the conscious verbal level, they're going to last longer. So habits of, you know, in our house, we have veggies and dip at every single meal. They just go in and out of the fridge and are constantly replenished and they're always there. We have salad lettuce. At every single meal, we talk about things like including fat and protein in our breakfast. And so, my hope is that as my kids, you know, go off into the world, I've got one who's graduated high school, but not quite off into the world yet because he's starting a business and still living at home. But it's my hope that building a lot of those habits is really important.

And then and so that's what you do starting really young. Right, is building those habits and just making them 18-year-long habits, ideally, or however long you've got left when you start that habit. And the conversations. About what, why we do what we do right, digging in, those can start more around 11, 12, 13, when kids are developmentally are more ready for that kind of thing but I but I do think it's important to ask kids like, well, why do you think your friends are eating different foods and how do you feel when you eat x, y or z type of you know maybe we'd call it a category of junk food or whatever it is. That's a whole separate conversation of can we label foods good and bad and healthy and unhealthy. It gets pretty ugly out there on social media when we when we get into that conversation but I'm sure there are multiple right answers and most of them are in the middle as opposed to at the extremes and definitely pulling kids into that conversation of, you know, how, what, what foods are healthy and unhealthy? How do we want to spend our money as a family? How do we want to spend our time preparing food? And why do we eat the way we eat? Hopefully that's all sinking in. And in a couple of years, you and I will know if what we've done is successful, Katie.

Katie: True. And I think we see those signs in our older ones already. And it'll be interesting to see how that happens when they're existing in the world. But I have a lot of confidence that they at least have a good foundation there and that they might get to experiment in some ways that they learn from. But I think in general, they at least have a solid foundation. I think that education piece is so underestimated because even at a young age, they're capable of understanding a lot. And I think if we talk about it in just a very casual way, as we're preparing food, mentioning the benefits of certain things. As an example, I mentioned recently the benefits of eating one or two raw carrots a day for both gut health, but also for skin tone and sun protection as we start getting into spring months. And I noticed several of my kids starting to do that, not because I told them to, but because they decided to.

Same with, I talk a lot about why I'm eating protein right now because I'm working out so hard. And I've noticed my athlete kids have started doing that as well of their own choice. And I think that's when it's really valuable. I think also when we can make the things, we want to prioritize available, like you said, very easily and always available and reduce the effort to getting them, then they become an easy choice. And when they can follow their own hunger, it's amazing at how often they'll make good choices. And even I've noticed in my little ones, there was a study that came out recently that said, you know, the Mediterranean diet and a lot of ancestral diets, they probably ate their biggest meal midday. Because that lined up with circadian cycles. And I've noticed babies tend to do that. They tend to eat more in the middle of the day when they're following their natural hunger cues. And I've noticed that when my kids have access to healthy food all the time, often
they'll make that midday meal their biggest meal. So I think there's so much value in letting them understand and prioritize their own cues and their own decisions around that, like you talked about. There is, I think people might have questions about what if they're encountering bad habits like emotional eating or food addiction? And is there a different way that we need to navigate those challenges so that we don't make them worse?

Katie: Do you mean bad habits in the adults or in the kids?

Katie: Either or, because I would guess often those things can exhibit in parents and then are modeled to the kids and or kids might start exhibiting symptoms of some of those things.

Katie: And I work with a lot of moms who are really concerned about that because they know they have a disordered relationship with food, right? They either do eat because of emotions or because of boredom or they've had a history of even an actual diagnosed eating disorder in the past. And they're very concerned, right, about passing kind of those traits or habits on to their kids. And I think, like in all things, right, if you have a temper, if you have a tendency to do anything that you don't like, we've got to become better people as adults and as parents. And I think, I think watching what you do specifically at the dinner table, it tends to be the time families come together. Although I love that you just mentioned the paradigm shift of all the healthy food does not have to be at dinner, right? I think parents flip out a lot more about that dinner meal. And we forget that there are other times during the day where our kids are eating. And so, we want to make sure that those times are also full of good nourishing food so that our kids can stock up then. If they're maybe not hungry at dinner, a lot of our little kids are already getting really tired by an adult's dinner hour. So that can be tricky.

I think when bad habits show up in our kids, it's, again, looking for the root cause. What is pushing that? Are there some emotions that are being unaddressed in other areas of life? Certainly, food is not the answer. So where's the answer, right, to those big emotions? Does your child need maybe some more one-on-one time? Do they need a cuddle or a snuggle or reading a book with you on a daily basis, do they need to talk through or deconstruct something that has happened to them? Right? My kids and I were in my van, and I sideswiped a semi a couple of years ago. That comes to mind every so often, like, oh my goodness, have my kids processed through that? Is that still part of like when my daughter started driver's training, I talked to her about that. Do you ever think about that? Is that coming back for you as you're getting behind the wheel for the first time?

And I think we can have similar conversations about food. Kids can have really traumatic experiences around food if they've gagged or if they've, you know, especially if they have just been through a stomach bug that caused them to throw up. That can really create some interesting relationships with food. So there are lots of big and little conversations and big and little implications to some of those bad habits. But it's really just instituting the good habits and the conversation and the connection, right? Because when we're connected with the people around us, we're going to be in a better state to encounter food.

Katie: Absolutely. And I love that you frame it in, you know, putting on the detective hat because certainly one thing I've learned in all these years in the health world is we're all so individual. And it really is about figuring out our own answers and our personalized approach. And on that note, I know there is so much more to this topic than we can cover in one podcast episode. But I believe you have a whole program and a challenge around this to help families very intentionally and directly. So I will link to it in the show notes. But can you speak about that and where people can find it?

Katie: Absolutely. A couple times a year, we run a free No More Picky Eating Challenge. And so, this is a five-day, one action step per day challenge where we're really going to dig into what's going on with your kids.
start with the question of what kind of picky eater you have. And let me tell you, Katie, the light bulb moments that go on with moms when they realize whether they have a picky phaser, a true picky eater, or a problem feeder. They can, I know we don't love labels, but sometimes we need a label so that we know, you know, from where to come at the situation. And then we do, we do one action step per day. By the end of the No More Picky Eating Challenge, 85% of parents feel less stress at the table. And that is the goal. The goal is not eating the food, although one in two kids do tend to eat a new food just in the five days. So that we will make sure that your link goes right to the waitlist for that. And when you hop on the waitlist, if it doesn't happen to be open, you'll get a free PDF of satiating snack ideas and kind of tackling the bedtime snack question and a little free email course that'll give some quick tips about picky eating while you're waiting.

Katie: Awesome. Well, I will link to that in the show notes as well as Kids Cook Real Food, which we mentioned earlier, and a lot of your other resources so people can find them all in one place. But Katie, it's always such a joy to chat with you. And I love the work that you're doing. I think these foundational things are so important for our kids for absolutely lifelong health. And I love that you're helping so many families. Thank you so much for being here and for sharing.

Katie: Thanks, Katie. My pleasure.

Katie: And thank you for listening. And I hope you will join me again on the next episode of The Wellness Mama Podcast.

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