

## **Picky Eaters 101: From stress to success Tips and tools to help your crew eat healthier**

By Kathleen Zelman and Lucille Beseler

[Kathleen Zelman]

Welcome to the Nutrition4Kids podcast, providing nutrition advice you can depend on. Hi, I'm registered dietitian nutritionist Kathleen Zelman. I'm a member of the Nutrition4Kids advisory board, your podcast host, and an award-winning journalist.

Our goal for the Nutrition4Kids podcast is to equip listeners with inspiration, skills, and parenting tips that are all based on evidence, are easy to understand, and doable for both parents and kids. We want to be your trusted source of information that helps you nourish your family. From breast and formula feeding, to introducing solid foods, feeding finicky eaters, food allergies, GI issues, to feeding young athletes, and many other medical conditions, we promise to bring you the latest nutrition information for you and your family.

We will tap leading experts in pediatric nutrition from our advisory board and beyond. Thank you so much for joining us today. Welcome to the inaugural Nutrition4Kids podcast.

I'm so excited to launch our very first podcast with the topic that I think most parents will be able to relate to. Today, we're talking about picky eaters, or as I used to say with my kids, when nothing green would pass their mouths. Today, we promise to give you a crash course in picky eaters 101 and help you to go from stress to success with tips and tricks to encourage your child to eat a healthier diet.

I am delighted to introduce you to my friend and our very esteemed guest, Lucille Besseler. She is also a member of our Nutrition4Kids advisory board and a treasure trove of experience and wisdom dealing with finicky eaters. Lucille is a registered dietitian nutritionist, certified diabetes educator, an author, a speaker, an entrepreneur.

She is the president and owner of the Family Nutrition Center of South Florida (FNC). And under her direction, the Family Nutrition Center has developed into a comprehensive practice providing a wide variety of nutrition services. And since she launched in 1991, they have seen over 300,000 children and adults.

So we know Lucille is an expert. She's also an author. Her book, *Nurturing with Nutrition*, is everything you need to know about feeding infants and toddlers.

And she was the president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, where she had a great term. We are so excited to have her. So welcome, Lucille.

[Lucille Besseler]

Thank you, Kathleen. It is so good to be here. And I will tell you, this topic brings a big smile to my face because I'm not sitting at the table with a lot of our parents who are listening who have that picky eater. But I think this is such a great topic. So I'm very excited to be here.

[Kathleen Zelman]

What could be better to launch our podcast than to talk to you and to talk about something that most parents deal with? And you know, the sad part is nearly half of American children ages one to five, they don't eat a vegetable a day, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control. And nearly one in three young children don't even eat fruit each day.

And we know how important fruits and vegetables are to providing vitamins and minerals and phytochemicals and fiber. But yet these kids are drinking sugar-sweetened beverages.

So dive right in. Give us your tips. How can parents get their kids to eat more nutritious foods, specifically those fruits and vegetables?

[Lucille Besseler]

So I really like how you opened it up, Kathleen, because if we think about it and we say these children never eat any vegetables and they never eat any fruit. And why is that? Is it because it's there and they just refuse?

Or is it more likely that it is not being presented to them? So a lot of times I will talk to parents and I'll say, okay, you want your child to eat broccoli. That's great, great vegetable.

If there's one vegetable that is like the best, let's say that broccoli is one of the best. But then I'll ask, do you eat broccoli? And they'll look at me and say, of course not. I hate that green stuff.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yeah.

[Lucille Besseler]

Good role modeling, right? You know, I think number one to all the parents that are listening, if you don't eat it, they will not eat it. So please be a good role model.

Make sure you put those vegetables on that plate. And you know what? Make them different because I happen to love vegetables and our listeners will say, oh sure, that's why you're a dietician.

But I don't like plain old steamed vegetables. I like them prepared differently, maybe roasted in the oven, maybe in soups, but make it different. Get the kids in the kitchen with you to help you.

Even the smallest child can do something, wash a piece of vegetable or help in some ways. So first make it available, be eating it yourself. Get the kids to help in the kitchen and make it interesting.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Well, you know, when you roast those vegetables, they caramelize. And so they actually take on a sweetness that if you could get it past their lips, they might say, hmm, you know, those that green eggs and ham? Yeah, well, maybe I'll try it.

[Lucille Besseler]

Yeah, I think that's one of our always our tips. When you put a new food on the plate, put it next to a food that they're used to seeing and that they like. So sometimes that helps.

But I agree. You make it takes different caramelized like you just said, and it'll make it more interesting. You know, but also I would say to parents, don't say if you eat your vegetable, you get your ice cream because I wasn't a dumb kid.

Yeah. And you know what? The broccoli is not the good one.

The the ice cream is the better one. So try not to do those things. I I know it's easier said than, you know, when you're right, you know, in that in that time period.

But try to use positive, you know, take one bite, take two bites.

[Kathleen Zelman]  
Right.

[Lucille Besseler]  
Just try it. That's all we ask is just try it.

[Kathleen Zelman]  
Well, we used to have the two bite rule that you just had to take two bites because kids need to understand that their taste buds are changing and that maybe you will like it, you know, give it a chance or dips, you know, dip that broccoli in a little ranch dressing. It might help it go down or might help that first bite get into their mouths.

[Lucille Besseler]  
I agree. I agree. And I love that two bite rule, you know, and and I always like to remind parents to it takes 15 repeated exposures before a child might like a new food.

So don't give up, you know, recharge your batteries. I know it gets frustrating. And especially after a long day of working and you know, you want to have a nice, pleasant dinner.

And then we're having tantrums at dinner. I know. No fun stuff.

It's not fun.

[Kathleen Zelman]  
Does it matter like the form, whether you buy fresh, organic, frozen, canned? What are your thoughts on all the different types of vegetables that are out there? Are some better than others?

[Lucille Besseler]  
So I love that question, Kathleen. And I'm asked that question quite a bit. And I say, anyway, you can get it in is great.

We do know that fresh is best. I happen to live in a state where it's summer all year long. So we do have an abundance of fruit and vegetables.

But maybe you live in a state where you can't get something at a certain time of the year. So if you can't get fresh, then by all means, use frozen. Or if your budget only allows you to use frozen, don't feel bad about that.

Use frozen. I always say I like canned for our hurricane supplies, you know, because can has a little bit more salt. But again, if you use canned vegetables, it's easy to store, right?

So that's right. Maybe you just want to wash them a little bit. So you can reduce the salt a little bit.

But that's my rule is always fresh, frozen, then canned. Organic is up to the individual. I as a dietician do not buy everything organic.

There might be one or two things that I would like that are organic, but I don't think it's necessary. I think if you wash your vegetables and fruit really well, that helps. But I think that's a personal decision.

What do you think, Kathleen?

[Kathleen Zelman]

I totally agree with you. I think it's way more important to eat more fruits and vegetables than to worry about how they were grown, because there's nutritional goodness there. There's no question.

So how about on the topic of vegetables: do french fries count? (Laughter.)

[Lucille Besseler]

No, they don't count. They're okay. There's nothing wrong with an occasional french fry. You know, I'm laughing because, you know, hey, as a dietician, I kind of have liked a french fry now and again.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Me too.

[Lucille Besseler]

The problem is when it is a steady part of your diet. If I say I had french fries once last month, that's not a big deal. But if you tell me that your child eats french fries three to four times a week, I'm going to say that's a problem.

Not because it's a carbohydrate because we need carbohydrates. Children need carbohydrates. It's very important.

They need to run and play and think and all those great things. But maybe we want to have a sweet potato or maybe we want to have a regular potato. Having fried foods is not so great.

Having salted fried foods, which that's what we think of when we talk about french fries, is not – a steady diet of that is not great.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yeah, I totally agree. Well, and I think it's not about the potato. So parents need to understand it's the fact that you're salting on your deep fat frying them.

So maybe take that same potato and roast them in the oven or try a baked potato just in its jacket with maybe a little bit of light sour cream on it. They might like that. So it's not the potato.

It's really that kids have, you know, pretty much sometimes that's all they eat. That's the only vegetable they eat is french fries. So it doesn't count.

[Lucille Besseler]  
Right.

[Kathleen Zelman]  
All right. Let's talk. Well, before we leave the vegetables, if you've done your best and it's a battle every night, is it OK to substitute fruit?

[Lucille Besseler]  
Yeah, I kind of think so. I would always say try to try the vegetables first. See, because, you know, as we look at this array of food and we look at, you know, what does fruit give us and what do vegetables give us and why? Why do you know, dietitians say we have to have a varied diet?

You know, sometimes people think that sounds awful corny. Well, there's a reason for it. All these fruits and vegetables have different vitamins and minerals and the colors kind of relate to those different vitamins, minerals and different kind of chemicals, let's say, in them, that our body needs.

So, yes, you can substitute a fruit for a vegetable. But still, remember, it is important to get those green vegetables in, even purple vegetables. You know, I'd love to say nobody likes beets, but boy, are beets one of the healthiest vegetables.

So maybe there's a way we can try to find a way to like them, you know. So, yes, but still try to push the vegetables.

[Kathleen Zelman]  
And with the beets, if you haven't ever tried a golden beet, they're much more mild. They're not as deep and red. And I don't know, kids struggle sometimes with the red beets.

Try the golden beets. So what do you think about the approach of stealth health? So, all right, the kid's not going to have vegetables.

But what if you make a smoothie or what if you make carrot muffins or you... you shred up the vegetables very, very small? That's what I've learned from my grandchildren. They can pick out the tiniest little onion and put it in your meatloaf or put in soups.

[Lucille Besseler]  
I love that idea, except: if you have a really very difficult, selective, picky eater to the extreme, sometimes if they see that in there, then they they think, OK, I don't trust you. So I

think you need to sense of your child or your grandchild and how they would react. But I kind of like that.

I love vegetables in soup because most of the times children do like vegetables and soup.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yes.

[Lucille Besseler]

You know, because it has that, you know, maybe you have chicken broth or vegetable broth or something like that. And it takes on that flavor. So I like doing it.

I like doing it in moderation. I also do like smoothies. I'm always a little apprehensive, like let's not drink our meals.

So as a last resort, maybe at the end of the day, so it doesn't negatively impact the other meals during the day. Maybe that's something you could do after dinner, almost like a dessert. I don't have a problem with that.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Great point. That's great. Well, those really finicky eaters, you know, them there, they go on food jags.

And so how do you handle it when all they'll eat is peanut butter or all they'll eat are chicken nuggets or they're in control, what they put in their mouth? How do you handle it?

[Lucille Besseler]

Well, that's a good point, because guess what? We can't force kids to eat. We can't put it in their mouth, make them chew it, make them swallow it.

I do have a good little joke, though, for the chicken nuggets. I always say when somebody says to me, "they'll only eat McDonald's chicken nuggets." I'll say, "well, why did you teach them how to drive?"

So remember, you are the one who are providing the chicken nuggets.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yeah, yeah. That's true.

That being said, you know, food jags, what happens with food jags, and you could relate to this probably, Kathleen, is that they eat the same thing for seven days straight, and then they never want to see it again. So the parent who thinks that that food was the magic food is going to be very sad after that seven days that that child doesn't ever want to see that food again. So my, you know, my advice, don't let them go on food jags.

Do not give them the same thing at each meal or day to day. Break it up. Do not do that.

Because then at some point that food, which was the magic food, will no longer be accepted. So you know what, put something on the plate and say, you got to take one bite. But I want chicken nuggets.

Okay, on Tuesday, we will have chicken nuggets. Maybe putting a little calendar on your refrigerator and saying, you know, Tuesday is chicken nuggets day. But the other days, we're going to try some other things.

[Kathleen Zelman]

I think that's a fabulous idea, like planning the meals out with the kids, letting them have some input. And then also, like you said, you know, who's driving to McDonald's, if you stock the house with healthy foods and keep the unhealthy ones, so that that's when you go out or it's a special occasion, it's not going to happen as often. And so if the meal that you put down in front of them is not exactly what they want, they have to eat it or do you let them go to bed hungry?

[Lucille Bessler]

Well, I'm not the one sitting there, right? That's saying, you know, I've always had this, this rule when, when people have come to my office and asked my advice, I'll always say treat each feeding event separately. So say at dinnertime, you give them a certain amount of time to eat.

If they do not finish within a reasonable amount of time, then you take it away. And then let's say you're going to have you usually or they usually have a snack an hour before bedtime, then treat that snack separately and say, you didn't eat your dinner. So for your snack, you can have a yogurt or you can have a smoothie.

That's another good thing. You say you finish your dinner, you get to choose your snack in an hour. But if you don't, then I get to choose your snack.

But don't hold the snack because they didn't eat dinner. That's kind of how I like to approach it. And of course, every family has to do what they feel comfortable with and what they can follow through.

Because if you flip flop, you're not going to get anywhere. Then they have it because remember, they're in control.

[Kathleen Zelman]

That's right. And so many parents are frustrated at becoming short order cooks. So if you have a couple of kids and they're all picky eaters, and this one wants grilled cheese, and this one wants the chicken nuggets, and this one wants spaghetti, you'll make yourself crazy.

So I love the idea of letting them choose their after dinner snack. And I like to think of snacks as mini meals. They're not treats.

They're mini meals. And so that you, you know, even if they hate their dinner, kids need so many vitamins, minerals, calories, protein, carbs, they need so much for their growth and development. And there's very little room for extras once you meet all those nutritional needs.

So parents, it's your job to help them meet their needs. Which brings me to my next question. What about vitamins?

[Lucille Besseler]

Oh, that's you know, that's such a hard question. So my feeling is, if we eat a well balanced diet, including us, and you eat all the things you're supposed to, then theoretically, we don't need vitamins and minerals. But my concern is that I think a lot of children do not eat well, and they do not eat as much fruit and vegetables as they should.

So I don't have a problem then giving them multivitamins. I think it's great to, you know, talk to your health care provider. And it doesn't have to be every day.

So we don't have to take a multivitamin every day. But maybe three times a week, you want to give them a multivitamin with minerals to fill in the blanks if you have that picky eater.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yeah, because you know what, it's the unlikely child that meets their nutritional needs. I hate to, I hate to speak the truth, but it's true. And what a multivitamin does is fill in those nutritional gaps so that, you know, a lot of little kids don't like to really eat meat.

They don't have great sources of iron. Some kids don't like dairy or, you know, like there's the source of calcium has to be replaced. So it's important to try to take a look at what your child is eating.

And if you are concerned, keep a diary, keep a diary for a couple of days and bring it to someone like Lucille or bring it to your health care provider and say, you know, how's this looking? And where do I need to put some emphasis and help them eat a little bit better?

[Lucille Besseler]

Yeah, I agree. You know, Kathleen, I think at one time, you know, pediatricians would say, oh, they're growing, you know, they're doing okay. But you know, nutrition is an ever-changing science.

You know, people get frustrated. They say, oh, you dietitians, you tell me today, something's good. And then tomorrow you tell me it's bad.

Well, that's because science changes and nutrition is a science. So we now know that micronutrients and even fat sources are so important for babies and for toddlers for their future cognition and development. So that's why maybe 15 years ago, if you would have asked me, should kids have vitamins, I would have said absolutely not.

They should be eating good food. Well, I still say they should be eating good food, but I say they're not getting enough. So yes, maybe we need to fill in.

The other thing is we forget that there are other things that are really important for brain development. And that's something like DHA. We've heard, because they're even, you know, breast milk has it.

And we now see infant formulas having this added. And this is a special fat that really does help with brain growth and improves cognition. So I don't know how many kids or toddlers eat salmon.



If they did, they would be getting a good robust amount of DHA, but I'm not sure they do. So, again...

[Kathleen Zelman]

You make a wonderful point because if parents think, okay, it's not just about growing and development, but brain health and in addition to brain health. And so you want to give your kid the best chance they can to be the best that they can be. And that includes how they do at school and how they think.

But it's also critically important that kids, they establish their eating habits early in life. So I don't know if there's an age, Lucille, but I used to think it was like by age five, they've kind of gotten there. They've established some fundamental eating habits.

Is it younger than that?

[Lucille Besseler]

I think that five is really a good point that you could say. You know, the thing is that at two and three, you know, they like to be a little bit... oppositional.

They're toddlers.

[Kathleen Zelman]

The terrible twos, right.

[Lucille Besseler]

Yes, the terrible twos, they call them that for a reason. But I think at five, they still want their independence, but they're kind of settling in. I would say if you have a child, by the time they're seven or eight and they haven't outgrown being a selective picky eater, you're going to have a problem because they're going to go into those teenage years being selective and picky.

So you have to tackle it. They don't automatically grow out of it by that age.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Yeah. Well, you know, the other thing is think about the environment that you're eating in. There should be no screens.

There should be no handhelds, no iPads, no television. It should be family time. And there's been so much over the years that has been written about the importance of families sitting down together, parents looking eye to eye, having nice conversation.

All of this, in addition to role modeling with that broccoli, really helps contribute to the dinner hour or maybe it's breakfast or lunch or whatever your family can do. But it's an important time to help establish good manners, good eating habits, and, you know, being excused from the table. All those things really contribute to choices that the children make.

[Lucille Besseler]

I agree. That's such an important time. You know, around the table is such an important time, whoever your family is, to reconnect at the end of the day, talk about your experiences and have a good, wholesome meal.

Now, it's hard, I know, to always get that meal on the table. But, you know, you could use little shortcuts. You could do a little prepping on the weekends, cut up those vegetables on the weekend so you could just, you know, cook them quickly.

I always like the idea of Sunday is a big meal so that there's leftovers for Monday. And it makes such an easy, you know, Mondays are tough days, right? So it makes it easy to all sit around and have a nice meal on Mondays.

But do that batch cooking. But don't underestimate the need for those family meals. And like you said, screen time, you know, we're going to learn more and more what we are doing to rewire children's brains with all the devices.

And not that that's my area of specialty, but I do see infants with iPads, keeping them, you know, occupied. And I'm not quite sure that our American Academy of Pediatrics says that's so great. So yeah, definitely lay off the screens at dinner, because that picky eater who's very just easily distracted will become distracted and will not eat for you.

[Kathleen Zelman]

Totally. Well, in our last few minutes, talk about sugar, because picky eaters typically don't have a problem with sugar or sugar sweetened beverages. And sometimes parents just want to pull their hair out and they give in to the demands.

So any tips or tricks? Yes.

[Lucille Besseler]

So first of all, let us let us remember that sugar is a learned, a learned taste. You're not born with loving sugar. So number one, sugar in the bottle is a no no.

Sprinkling sugar on foods. No, if you if you've done this, that's why they really have that, quote, taste for sugar. Sugar doesn't provide anything but empty calories.

And so the other thing is that don't think honey is a good substitute just because the bees made it doesn't make it any better. The more you give children sugar, the more it's going to blunt their appetite, provide them with, again, no vitamins, minerals, and just a whole lot of calories.

And then basic stuff. It's not good for their teeth. It really does affect and increase the risk of dental caries. And you really want to minimize any kind of of I don't like to say addiction to sugar, but that, you know, that urge for sugar, make that a special occasion thing.

You know, candy. We all like to have a piece of candy every once in a while, but make it every once in a while.

[Kathleen Zelman]

And if you can't control it, don't bring it into the house. And I love your point about sugar or honey that goes for agave or syrup are all sweeteners. And the important message here is you don't need it, ever.

If you never had another piece of candy or you never had any sugar in your diet forever, there's no consequence to that. So remember, these are extra calories. And especially if you're dealing with children who, you know, eat too much, you know, that's a place where you want to definitely pull back.

Well, Lucille, this is awesome. I mean, I know it's hard. It really is.

But yet, you know, having these healthy foods available to your kids, thinking through your strategy, and it's not going to happen overnight. Like you said, 15 times sometimes before you get them to put something in their mouth. I'm actually going into my grandson's kindergarten class this week to do a little thing on eating the rainbow.

And I'm bringing all these different vegetables. And I'm just hopeful that with my dips and with the kind of playing touching that, you know, we'll get some kids to maybe try hummus with their carrots. And I got carrot chips that are going to be easy to eat.

So we'll see.

[Lucille Besseler]

It sounds great. And I think a message just to leave, you know, our audience today. Remember, you're doing this for their future health.

The worst problem we still have in America is the risk of obesity and obesity related diseases. So we don't want to see children with type two diabetes or high blood pressure when they're in their teens. And we're seeing it.

So that's why we say eat right, from the start. We want to encourage them to eat healthy so that they are healthy in the future.

[Kathleen Zelman]

And you know what, eating healthy is delicious. It's not like a compromise. But you know, you got to get them there.

There's a there's a leap there. But thank you so much. Your pearls of wisdom are fabulous.

And I think lots of parents are going to enjoy this. And thank everyone for joining us today. We would love it if you would subscribe to our newsletter.

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