



Growing Healthy Eaters

Insights from January 24th's Presenters

Scope:

1 in 3 Canadian children are affected by excess weight, fueling a rapid rise in adult-onset diseases like Type 2 Diabetes, Hypertension, and Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD), resulting in a **\$27.6 Billion** annual health care cost.

Key Takeaways:

Food affects everything: learning, focus, memory, and emotional regulation all decrease with increased processed food intake, while anxiety and depression increase after just 4–5 days of eating processed foods!

The nervous system drives eating- the way you interact with, talk about and make food impacts how your children do!

Parents are the start, but not the end. It's hard but not impossible to break habits! As a parent you have to be willing to make some sacrifices yourself first to be able to help your child. There is a crucial turning point- when the child begins to make better choices than the parents!



Dr. Rikin Patel: Lifestyle Medicine in Practice

- Healthy eating patterns can be developed, regardless of background or perceived barriers.
- Dr. Patel shared three case studies that demonstrated families and lifestyle changes they made to increase overall health, with great success.
- The first 20 years of life influences overall health later in life. So starting early is getting “the most bang for your buck”. When we are younger, our brain has greater capacity for change. Life hack: it’s **never too early to start**, in fact **EARLIER IS BETTER**.
- Behavior change is **simple but not easy**.
- Evidence-based dietary changes can reverse the most burdensome chronic diseases.
- Greater success is when the entire family is on board.

Clarissa Kennedy: Raising Kids on Real Food in a Processed World

- **Highly-processed foods are:** Industrially made & designed to be fast, cheap, and hyper-palatable. They contain ingredients you can't use at home
- **Ultra-processed foods hijack appetite.** These foods are scientifically formulated to create a loss of control in the individual consumer. This means children aren’t just craving foods but a specific chemical reward their brain remembers.
- Young brains do not have the same decision making abilities that develop later in life, therefore they are **susceptible to developing positive/negative habits**.
- **Consistency over intensity:** The key is to make effort eating healthy consistently- we get brand new taste buds every 14 days!
- Food industry knows how hard it is to be a parent- they abuse this (see tips below)
- **Rule #1: Add Before You Subtract.** Don’t start with banning certain foods, start with adding nourishment from whole foods.

A common theme among presenters: learn about what you eat/drink!



Natalie Pelto: Bringing the Fun Back to Meal Time

- **The food environment has changed, but biology hasn't.** We used to have 90% whole foods, whereas now we have 80-90% processed foods.
- The old advice of “starving them out” fails today because **our food is weaponized against biology.**
- **Nervous system drives eating:** kids learn from their parent's nervous system. If we are overwhelmed, they likely are too. Co-regulation matters, consider safety before curiosity. This means the more fun you can make the eating experience, the more nutritional you can make the content.
- **Parents are the leverage point:** parents teach kids how to ‘hunt’ in the processed grocery food stores. Kids mirror adult behaviors so intention is key.
- **Picky eating: it's not stubborn or defiant, it's biology.** Sensory processing differences, gut problems, nutrient deficiencies, and nervous system dysregulation all drive food refusal.
- Use the 4 E's:
 - **Emotional Intelligence:** Recognize your child's inner world and regulate yourself. 80% of the work is within the adult. Calm body=safety.
 - **Expectations:** Go in 10% increments. Exposure is goal, reaction to ignoring food is neutral and progress is not linear.
 - **Encouragement:** Invite curiosity in micro invitations- seeing or touching the food can be enough.
 - **Environment:** Eat together. Simplify your kitchen, children will try food faster when playing!
- There's hope!
 - Change is possible and support exists



Did you know?
If your child is a choosy eater, this can be a sign of zinc or iron deficiency.



Common Questions

How Do I Get My Child to Start Eating Whole Foods?

1. **Start Early and Set Expectations:** Introduce whole foods, like fruits and vegetables, early to normalize them. Avoid using junk food as rewards, so kids associate healthy foods with enjoyment, not punishment.
2. **Involve Kids in the Process:** Let children help with grocery shopping or meal prep. This creates excitement and ownership over their meals. Offer choices like “Would you like broccoli or carrots today?” to give them control.
3. **Model Healthy Eating Behavior:** Kids mimic adults. Eat the same whole foods you want them to enjoy. Family meals create opportunities to reinforce healthy eating habits.
4. **Make Healthy Food Fun and Accessible:** Use creative presentations, like fruit kabobs or veggie faces on a plate, to engage kids. Keep healthy snacks, such as sliced fruits, vegetables, or nuts, easily accessible.
5. **Be Patient and Persistent:** Kids may need to try new foods multiple times before they accept them. Don't give up after the first refusal. Avoid pressuring kids; instead, offer new foods alongside familiar favorites.
6. **Limit Sugar and Processed Foods:** The more children consume sugary foods, the less inclined they are to enjoy whole foods. Gradually reduce sugary snacks. Offer naturally sweet whole foods, like berries or apples, as alternatives to sugary treats.
7. **Incorporate Whole Foods into Familiar Dishes:** Add vegetables to smoothies, pasta sauces, or homemade pizza. Serve whole grain versions of kid favorites, such as whole wheat bread or brown rice.
8. **Create Routines Around Eating:** Establish regular meal and snack times to prevent grazing on unhealthy foods. Serve meals without screens to focus attention on food and mindful eating.



Did you know?
Kids need to be shown a new food as many as 10-15 times before they become familiar enough to try it.

How do I prepare healthy whole food meals when tired and busy?

1. Meal Prep Once a Week

- Batch cooking: Prepare large portions of grains, proteins, and veggies (e.g., quinoa, roasted chicken, and steamed broccoli) that can be mixed and matched throughout the week.
- Freeze portions: Make soups, stews, or curries and store them in individual servings in the freezer.

2. One-Pan or Sheet-Pan Meals

- Place your protein (like chicken or tofu), veggies (broccoli, bell peppers), and starch (sweet potatoes or quinoa) on one baking sheet. Season and bake at 400°F (200°C) for 20-30 minutes.

3. Use a Slow Cooker or Instant Pot

- Toss in ingredients like lentils, beans, vegetables, or chicken in the morning, and have a ready meal by dinnertime.
- Example: A chili with beans, tomatoes, spices, and your choice of protein.

4. Healthy Convenience Items

- Pre-cut veggies, bagged salads, or frozen fruits and vegetables. Green Giant makes an awesome cauliflower rice which no one would know the difference between that and real rice. 5 ½ minutes in the microwave
- Use pre-cooked grains (like brown rice or quinoa packets) to save time.

5. Smoothies and Bowls

- Smoothies with greens, fruits, seeds (like chia), and a protein (yogurt or protein powder) make a quick, nutritious meal.
- Bowls with leftover grains, proteins, raw veggies, and a dressing or sauce.

6. Simple Recipes with Minimal Ingredients

- Example: Avocado toast with a boiled egg or hummus wrap with pre-cut veggies and greens.

7. Double Your Dinners

- Cook more than needed for dinner, and use leftovers for lunch or another meal.

8. Focus on Simple Snacks as Meals

- A combination of fruit, nuts, yogurt, or boiled eggs can make quick meals when you're pressed for time.

9. Plan for Easy Protein Options

- Stock your fridge with boiled eggs, rotisserie chicken, canned beans, or baked tofu that can be tossed into salads or wraps.

10. Use Simple Sauces to Elevate Meals

- Make or buy healthy dressings and sauces (tahini or vinaigrettes) to drizzle over bowls, veggies, or proteins.



How do I talk to kids about food without causing harm?

Children don't just learn WHAT to eat, they learn how to FEEL about eating. Research in developmental psychology and feeding shows:

- a. Moralizing food ("good/bad") increases shame, secrecy, and rebellion
- b. Restrictive/judgmental language can disconnect kids from hunger and fullness cues
- c. Shame-based food messaging is linked to: emotional eating, power struggles and disordered eating patterns later in life

Feeding research by Ellyn Satter and others shows kids thrive when adults provide structure without judgment, emotional safety at meals supports self-regulation, not chaos. Kids need food language that teaches them.

What to Avoid (and Why)

- a. Avoid "That's bad food" "You shouldn't eat that" "That's junk" "That will make you fat / hyper / unhealthy"
- b. When food is labeled "bad," eating it can trigger guilt, shame, secret eating and sneaking, eating past fullness ("I already messed up")

What to Say Instead (Brain-Based Language)

- Try language that teaches function, not morality: "This helps your brain feel calm." "This helps you stay full longer." "This gives you steady energy for school." "Different foods do different jobs."
- This works because it builds body awareness, supports autonomy, and keeps curiosity alive. Kids learn to ask: How does this make me feel? What does my body need right now?

Research on child development and nervous-system regulation shows:

- Kids are more influenced by tone, facial expression, emotional energy, not lectures.
- You can say the "right" words in the wrong tone and kids will feel judged anyway.
- Aim for neutral, curious, calm, matter-of-fact
- Example: ❌ "That's not good for you." ✅ "Let's add something that helps you stay full."

When kids hear this kind of language consistently, they learn:

- Food is information, not a test. Their body can be trusted. Eating isn't something to hide or fight about. Regulation is supported, not demanded.

You're not raising kids who "eat perfectly", but kids who can listen to their bodies in a loud food world.

- You don't have to say this perfectly
- Repair matters more than precision
- One calm comment can undo ten anxious ones
- This is about direction, not control





Resources

Contacts:

Dr. Rikin Patel: Reset Pediatric Lifestyle Medicine

<https://www.resetpediatrics.com/>

IG: @dr.rikinpatel or @resetpediatrics

Youtube: thekungfudoc

Clarissa Kennedy: Reinvent

<https://foodaddictionhelp.ca/my-services>

Sweet Sobriety

<https://www.sweetsobriety.ca>

Food Junkies Podcast

<https://www.foodjunkiespodcast.com>

Natalie Pelto: Blue Life Rx

<https://www.blueliferx.com/>

Websites

1. Sugarproof: Recipes and Tips <https://www.sugarproofkids.com>
2. Nicole Avena: How Sugar Affects the Brain
https://www.ted.com/talks/nicole_avena_how_sugar_affects_the_brain?subtitle=en
3. Best Website for Easy Low Carb Recipes and Weekly Meal Planning:
<https://www.dietdoctor.com/home>

Books

1. The Plantrician Guide
2. Salt, Sugar, Fat- Michael Moss
3. Hooked- Michael Moss
4. Sugarproof- Michael I. Goran
5. Super food for Superchildren- Prof. Tim Noakes, Jonno Proudfoot and Bridget Surtrees.
6. The Ultra-Processed People Cookbook- Dr. Chris van Tulleken