

Food and Mealtimes Q and A with Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:00:00 Hello, this is Dr. Laura Markham. In this audio I'll be answering some of the most common questions that parents ask about eating, food, and mealtimes. Remember, we're always applying our three big ideas. We start by regulating our own emotions and behavior, then we connect with our child, finally, instead of trying to control our child, we coach them to be their best self, both by helping them with their emotions and by creating an environment where the child can thrive. So, let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

General Thoughts on Healthy Eating

Dr. Laura Markham: Remember, you never need to control how much food your child eats, ever. You provide healthy food in your house, you provide always something in every meal that your child likes. Otherwise, your child decides how much goes into their body and how much they want to eat of each thing at each meal. Just make sure you're not giving them unhealthy food options and they'll eat healthy food. And of course, that means you have to eliminate sugar from their diet except for special occasions, but that's probably what you want to do anyway.

Question 1:

Parent: 00:01:10 So I'm a mother of two boys, a three and a half and a two year old, and I have a lot of difficulty with food and eating. And I know I've done some wrong things when they were growing up, especially my three and a half year old. I've bribed him, I've set him in front of the TV, I didn't introduce him to a lot of variety. And now I've done a lot

of research so I know that I should focus on eating as a family, and not talking too much about it, and not forcing anything. He will not eat meat and his diet is very limited. But I needed a step by step guide as to what I should do to survive this. It's becoming very stressful for our family.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay. So I want to start by asking you, what would happen if he didn't eat? Do you think he would starve himself?

Parent:

No, I know he will not starve himself, but for me it's a big fear and I'm really hard on myself for what I've done for him to be where he is. I know that he will not starve, I just want to encourage him to reverse this negative attitude that he's developed towards food.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Right. So, when kids develop a negative attitude towards food, it's usually because there's been a power struggle, and so it sounds like it was really important to you at one time, before you educated yourself about this, that he eat and eat well. So I don't know if you were one of those people who followed him around the room with a spoon but there are plenty of those, right? It runs in some cultures actually, but there are a lot of people who do it. So, I think you're right, that having an easygoing attitude about it now will really help.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I also want to reassure you, that many picky eaters change over time because their body actually changes. Right now, his taste buds are more reactive than yours and mine. So we can handle bitter taste, but he doesn't like bitter taste, as an example. So, it makes sense that as he gets older, he will have interest in more food, right. Kids often have very limited food interest when they're three, which he is. You mentioned that he doesn't like meat. There are plenty of people who don't eat meat and get enough protein, there are other ways to get enough protein. So, that's not an emergency, either that he doesn't eat meat, although it can be a hassle if you're trying to figure out how to get enough protein into him. But between eggs and dairy, and rice and beans, there are a lot of different ways for him to get protein, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: So, I'm going to recommend a book to you. Do you know Ellyn Satter's work, S-A-T-T-E-R?

Parent: No. S-A-T-T-E-R?

Dr. Laura Markham: Yes, S as in Sam, A-T-T-E-R, Ellyn, the book is called, *Child of Mine Feeding With Love and Good Sense*. If you just Google that you'll find the book. It's an old book so you can get it on Amazon for a nickel. And I don't agree with everything in the book, like she doesn't really believe in snacking and I believe kids have small stomachs and need to snack some. But in general, I love her approach, which is, you put healthy food in the house, no sweets, and the kids will over time eat a balanced diet, which is what the research shows. And it helps, I think this will reassure you and help you to be less anxious about it. Just let yourself off the hook, you're kid is going to be fine. He really is. Both of them are going to be fine.

Dr. Laura Markham: And yes, probably your oldest thinks that food is a little bit of a power struggle, but it takes two people to have a power struggle. So as you pull back from that, you'll find that he also pulls back from it, he won't need to be struggling against you. So, I think you'll find that it will become easier the more you relax about it. He's not going to starve himself, it's going to be okay, and over time, when they don't have access to sweets, that's the important part, children will choose a balanced diet, even if today they eat all carbs, tomorrow, they'll eat some carrots or green beans and the next day they'll eat some eggs. And it's okay if they don't eat protein every day, for instance, they will choose a balanced diet over time.

Parent: Okay. Thank you for the book recommendation.

Question 2:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:06:09 A parent is asking a question about her child who is a picky eater and was in an orphanage in her toddlerhood. She

doesn't want to create an unhealthy relationship with food but it's hard to get her child to eat enough food. So, I would say, if your pediatrician is telling you that there's a problem, then I would ask the pediatrician how you can supplement your child with a nutritional shake or something, that your child might enjoy. But I would not fight with your child over food, I would not get into that power struggle. And if your pediatrician does not think it's a problem, then I don't think you need to worry about it. I think your pediatrician would tell you if it's a problem; don't make that decision for yourself.

Question 3:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:06:58

A parent is worried because her three and a half year old always wants to be spoon fed, and if she leaves him to eat on his own, he doesn't eat very much and he ends up getting sick. So, I would say, children do not starve themselves. They don't starve themselves. So, I just don't believe that he's going to end up getting sick every time he doesn't eat enough. So, if you offer him food he likes, he's going to eventually feed himself. And he's three and a half, and he's going to need to learn to do that. I think it's just a bad idea to spoon feed a three year old every meal. It's fine occasionally if they want to be babied, but in general, what you could say is, "You want me to feed you like a little baby? Okay, but you're a big baby now."

Dr. Laura Markham:

And make a game of it and put the spoon in the wrong place like in his ear, not with food on it obviously. And get him laughing about it, and let him show you with a spoon in his hand where the food goes into his mouth. And make it a fun thing. But just have the family rule be: "When you're three and a half, you feed yourself," period.

Question 4:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:08:22

This parent has an interesting question. Her daughter earned some money from odd jobs, she's eight years old, and she likes to spend the money on chocolate bars and food items like whole milk and yogurt but she's putting on weight. So I want to say first of all, that eight year old girls are actually starting to put on weight, that's how nature designed them, it's setting them up for puberty when they're going to shoot up. So it's normal, that's one thing. It's great that you don't comment on weight, that you talk about food to help her grow. You also might want to talk about food that feels good to her body instead of just to her mouth. Like crunchy carrots taste sweet in your mouth and your body feels better after you eat them than with a chocolate bar.

Dr. Laura Markham:

She might disagree with you. She may not recognize that feeling yet, but you could start talking about it. I do think kids should be able to decide how to spend their own money that they earn, but it has to be within the restriction of family rules. So, you're not going to let her buy porn or cigarettes, I mean, they're also illegal but still you're not going to let her buy things that are against your family values. If she wants to buy an occasional chocolate bar to eat after dinner, that seems permissible, but you can set a limit that it's once a week and it's after dinner. You've talked about yogurt and whole milk. Most yogurt has sugar, but it is a reasonable choice. So again, that's about education, reading labels with her to increase the chance she's going to pick a healthy one. I agree with you that sugar is pretty unhealthy.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I'm not a physician, I'm not a nutritionist, but my take on whole milk is that we know that whole foods are a lot better for you than altered foods. And that low fat diets create cravings that cause people to seek out sugar, and sugar is bad for you, it's a killer. So, I don't think whole milk is a problem, that's my own opinion. But you didn't come to me for nutritional advice, you wanted to know how to set limits on food. I think that if you forbid her

from buying things, by the time she's eight, that's just going to create lying and secrecy around food. I think you have to have discussions, you have to make agreements. You can't fully control what she eats but you can restrict some things, right? Just after dinner, at certain times of the week, whatever. And you can educate and you can influence, and you can talk about health rather than weight.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And your final part of the question was about your parents or your partner's parents, who bring sweets all the time. I would have a conversation with them in private. Are they bringing sweets because they think it's going to make her happy? I mean, point out that she's gaining weight and they're sabotaging her developing capacity to be self disciplined in what she eats. And brainstorm with them about what else they can bring as a present when they come. Maybe they just know that you're a healthy eater and they want good food to eat while they're at your house that they like. But you know what, during the visits they have with you, they can eat healthier food, if they're eating junk at home all the time, who cares? But they don't have to bring it to your house.

Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:11:17

A parent is asking about meltdowns from a difficult seven year old. When she's cooking dinner the seven year old starts to melt down, it could last an hour, it used to be two but it's getting better with the help of this course. I'm glad. And she can see it through and if she doesn't, there will be another meltdown, especially if he gets hungrier. But meanwhile, the second son, the five year old is getting hungry, it's getting close to dinner and he's getting upset too.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, first of all, this is why you do preventive maintenance, so this doesn't happen. You do roughhousing earlier in the day, you do special time with each child before you start dinner. And you empty backpacks. And if you do all that, you're not going to have the problem you're having, I

guarantee you. But I also want to make a plug here. Not just to this parent but for everybody, about dinner. Minimize your cooking. Five to 10 minutes. You can actually get dinner on the table in 10 minutes. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. You do a little cooking on the weekend and throw it in the freezer. You have leftovers on Monday night, Tuesday you have scrambled eggs, raw carrots out of the bag. Wednesday you pull something out of the freezer, the soup that was in there. Thursday, you make pasta and use a jar of sauce. If you're looking for another vegetable, frozen peas, you don't even have to cook them, just let them thaw, stir them around. Most kids love them that way. Peanut butter sandwiches and tomato soup on Friday nights. Just don't obsess about dinner.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Dinner is important. But the point is really to get healthy food into your kids 24/7. So let them snack on healthy food. Your kid should not be hungry when they sit down to dinner because they should have been eating healthy food right along. So, dinner will be relatively short and they might eat a little bit, but you can feed them leftovers from last night's dinner while you're cooking dinner. And you can feed them other healthy food, some sort of veggie, They will not usually eat veggies at dinner but they always eat veggies, in my experience, at snacks when it's not in competition with carbohydrates. So veggies and a source of protein, tofu cubes, cheese cubes, turkey slices, whatever your family eats. And really don't obsess about dinner. Keep it short so you have time, because this is arsenic hour, this is the time of day when everyone falls apart.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then the final part to what this parent is asking, when your child is having a meltdown and you have to interrupt it, you can say, "Oh, Sweetie, you're having such a hard time, we're going to need to stop because we're all so hungry and I need to get dinner on the table. I want to hear the rest of what you're upset about later. Right now, what can we do to help you calm down, let's get you something to drink, some milk, or let's get you a little snack or a slice of turkey and an apple to hold you before dinner. And let's put you in your calm down corner, you

can get your blanky and curl up in a corner of the kitchen, and we'll give you your favorite picture book, and you can have your calm down jar, whatever will help you calm down."

Dr. Laura Markham:

But you can expect that it's still going to be hard for them. Many kids can do this if they're used to you really listening to them, and they don't have a full backpack. But you can expect that they might have a hard time all evening until you do really give them a chance to get those feelings out.

Question 6:

Parent:

00:14:39

Thank you so much for all that you do. And for the wonderful articles that you've written, and it's such a wonderful resource, I pass it on to all my friends. And I tell them, you don't have to buy anything because there's just so much information there. So, thank you for that. My question is regarding my daughter. She's seven years old. We're just getting started with peaceful parenting but at the same time ... I did the 1, 2, 3 magic for a long time, and it does work, rarely do I have to put her in a timeout and, of course, she's too old for that now. But she's also very smart and very defiant. She likes to do things her way, and I'm the same way.

Parent:

So, everything you write about with self motivation, and self control, doesn't come from someone telling you what to do, so that's why I've found your resources to be so helpful because I would rather be that parent, the peaceful parent. And I want to have a good relationship with her as we grow older.

Parent:

So it leads me to the biggest challenge that I have is her weight. We're not skinny people, but I don't want her to have a problem. I feel like I do my best to serve her good foods and this and that, but she's seven and she's definitely in the 99th percentile of her weight. I just don't know how to talk to her about it without bringing shame. I

try not to do that. I try to talk about being healthy. I try to use those words but I feel like I talk about it way too much.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay. So, first of all, we can't expect a seven year old to change eating habits unless everyone in the family changes eating habits, whether or not they show up as having a weight challenge. I'm not understanding from what you're saying if she actually has bad eating habits or whether she was born with a certain body type.

Parent:

It's probably both.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay. So body type, you're not going to do anything about, that's what she was born with. But she will have to spend the rest of her life managing it without developing an eating disorder or self-loathing or any of the other risk factors here, and I hear that's what you're trying to avoid and you're wondering how to talk with her about it. I think the answer is, you're not going to be talking with her about her body per se. What you are going to do is make sure that your family becomes a family with a real enjoyment of healthy eating and physical activity. So, you're doing those things with her, right? You're not just telling her to be physical, you're making sure that every single day, she's outside running around. And if there's no one to run around with outside, you're outside running around with her. And you would involve her in cooking together.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You'll have to think about how this works in your family, but you could consider the approach where there's no snacking. But if you do have snacking, then snacking needs to be done only with healthy food. And I would not keep anything in the house, I don't care what you like to eat, or your partner likes to eat, or any other kids like to eat, whatever there is in the house is healthy so that there isn't a sense of somehow she is the one who's not allowed to eat these foods. Right? It's more that our family eats healthy. Do you have any other children?

Parent:

No, it's just the three of us.

- Dr. Laura Markham: Then I would just say, you're the adults, you can find a way to get your need for chocolate, or pancakes, or anything else, ice cream, met some other way, but don't keep stuff in the house and don't eat it in front of your daughter obviously. I realize that by seven she already knows what french fries are, but if she is always is in a situation in your home, where there is enjoyment of healthy eating and where there's enjoyment of physical activity, those will become second nature to her. And then it's never a matter of you have to do something different with your body because your body somehow has sabotaged you, or is not up to snuff, or you're not good enough, which is where the self loathing will come from.
- Parent: Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Does this all make sense?
- Parent: Yes.
- Dr. Laura Markham: I think that you're going to need to make this a project over the next period of time. You said it was partly her body type and partly what she eats. Well you really look at what's healthy eating and you convert your family over. I wouldn't do it cold turkey, but I would do a definite mobilization where you're turning the battleship and it's step by step. And I think there's a lot out there at this point that you can read about how to do that and become healthier and healthier in what you eat.
- Dr. Laura Markham: And taste buds will change. Over time her taste buds will begin to appreciate other things and not need so much sweetness. And also her intestinal flora and fauna will change. I'm not a biologist but I know that when we're craving sugar for instance, it's because our intestinal flora and fauna, those microbes in there, are asking us for more sugar, just the way they ask us for more alcohol, right, if we're older and we drink. So, we're fostering certain microbes by what we choose to take into our bodies and hers will change over time, as you feed her different foods, and she will not crave the same things that she used to crave. And that will be true for you as well.

Dr. Laura Markham: As a girl in our culture, what will end up happening is, being in the 99th percentile for weight will give her incredible baggage. And so what you can do by intervening in this way I think will really help her to maintain optimal health as well as an optimal healthy body even if she never kowtows to the ridiculous standards for fitness that are pervasive in our Western culture.

Question 7:

Parent: 00:21:37 I was wanting to talk about my daughter and her eating. She's always been really particular about what she eats. And at five she still wouldn't eat a significant amount of family dinner. We've looked into it, we haven't been the most consistent, but we've been trying to have regular meal times and say "This is what's on the table, you choose what you eat, but it's got to be off the table" and that sort of stuff. So we're trying to do all this. I think my own anxiety is fearing she's never going to be able to be in social situations because she doesn't eat anything. She doesn't like to eat anything if she sees a table full of food. At a preschool or whatever, she doesn't want to have anything to do with it.

Parent: And she won't eat anything that's mixed together, everything has to be very separate. And I don't know if she's got a sensory issue or if we've just been too indulgent of the whole thing.

Dr. Laura Markham: How old is she?

Parent: She's five.

Dr. Laura Markham: I don't think it's because you've been too indulgent. When she first transitioned to solid food was it challenging?

Parent: She wanted to feed herself right from six months so that was fine but she never wanted to eat baby mush or anything like that.

Dr. Laura Markham: That's fine.

- Parent: Yeah, she just wanted to eat things like chickpeas, or cheese, or ham, or something like that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So there was no challenge when she first started eating solid food, and she didn't have any early feeding issues like hospitalizations, feeding tubes, operations, anything like that?
- Parent: No, she didn't. She fed well. The first three months she had a tongue tie and we had difficulties with feeding and she lost a bit of weight until we got that sorted out. So yes, she was definitely hungry. I would say it was really hard to get enough milk into her, because she wasn't breastfeeding well the first three months.
- Dr. Laura Markham: I wonder if there's an issue there that's connected? Not always, but oftentimes if something happens early on with feeding it changes their relationship to food. Like she's able to be hungry and still look at the table of food and not want to eat it. You know what I mean? It's an interesting question whether there's a relationship here. I would experiment with asking her questions and helping her become aware of what it feels like to be hungry and what it feels like to be full. And I would tell her the story of when she was a baby and tongue tied and she was hungry, for months she couldn't get enough food, she was so hungry. And that she got used to being hungry. But it's not a good thing, it's not a good feeling, she doesn't need to be hungry. And she can always feed herself. She never has to worry. There will always be food she wants.
- Dr. Laura Markham: I think there's a story there that she needs to get told and to find a way to empower herself to get past it, so that's the first thing I would say. The second thing I hear is some anxiety in your voice. You said you have your own anxiety about social situations for her. I think that your anxiety cannot help her.
- Parent: Probably a year ago, we were very anxious at mealtimes and they were unpleasant. We've managed to be a lot more positive and relaxed now but there's still anxiety there, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: She's already got an issue. We don't know what it is, and it's probably a combination of the childhood, the baby thing plus maybe there's a sensory issue too. Did she have any other sensory issues?

Parent: I don't think anything major like she's not a kid who won't have messy hands or anything like that. Her development is normal and no issues socially or anything like that.

Dr. Laura Markham: So probably not.

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: So probably there's not a sensory issue. And a baby who reaches for cheese and chickpeas probably doesn't have a sensory issue. Usually we see it in the kids who only want the creamy stuff, the baby food, the puree, usually, not always. Anyway, I don't think I'm hearing that and I don't know what it is, but I do know that your anxiety will make it worse so you really have to envision her happy, healthy, and having a great time socially. And it doesn't matter about food. Who cares about the food thing? She's not going to starve herself.

Parent: Okay. I thank you.

Dr. Laura Markham: And talk to her about her babyhood too. I think you might see some movement there.

Parent: Okay, thank you.

Dr. Laura Markham: All right, good luck. Bye bye.

Question 8:

Parent: 00:26:33 I have a four year old, he's a little over four, and he was born prematurely so he's a little bit underweight and he's always stayed below the curve. So, getting food into him is important. And we've been trying to let him make decisions but it's really hard because he just is dreaming

and if we don't feed him or we are not coaxing him, he just isn't taking in food and that becomes a really huge stressor for us, because mealtimes can go on for an hour and he still might not eat enough. So I try to stay calm as much as I can but I feel like mealtimes are really stressful, and how can I help him take more responsibility for this while keeping my patience because there's a medical reason as well, to make sure he grows.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I hear you're concerned about him growing. I wonder if you're bringing anxiety to this that doesn't need to be there? So let me start by saying, I'm not a medical doctor, I'm not a physician, I'm a psychologist. But I've never heard of a child starving themselves. And if he's already a little bit below the curve, I think he doesn't have as much need for calories to power his body as a kid who's in their 90th percentile, who's bigger and therefore taking in more calories. So I wonder if what's going on here is that your pressuring him has set up a reaction where he feels that he's being controlled and the only way he can maintain integrity in the situation is to push back at you. I don't know, but that's very common. And I heard the way you phrased it is, how can he take more responsibility, and you're right on target there, that is the right goal, is for him to take the responsibility.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And I think the only way that we can help our children to take responsibility is to enroll them as partners. We can't be pressuring them, does that make sense?

Parent:

Yeah, it does. It's just really hard to put it into practice but we'll try.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Well, I hear you and it is hard because you're anxious. So, I would say, have a discussion with your physician, his pediatrician, and tell them what you've told me and say, look, we try our best to get him to eat, but we don't want power struggles over food, we think it's backfiring and he's resisting. We're going to make the food as delicious as possible and try to make things he likes, but we want to not be in a position of forcing him, not even forcing, of constantly battling about it. Is he healthy enough that we

can do that? And any physician is going to say, well, let's try it. Let's weigh him again in three months and see if things are worse or better, right?

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: So, it's worth the experiment. He's not going to starve himself in three months, I guarantee you that.

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: I think what makes it really hard for us is we have a lot of family staying with us for extended periods of time. The grandparents visit and we have them with us for about five to six months at a time. We're from India, where culturally kids are fed and kids you basically feed them till you think they're full. So it's really a big battle and it just becomes really stressful around mealtimes. And having this conversation with the elders in the family is not as easy without offending anybody. So it just feels like a lot to manage.

Dr. Laura Markham: So there's a lot of pressure on you that if you're being good parents, you will follow your child around with a spoon in your hand shoveling food into his mouth, right.

Parent: A lot of distractions, storytelling.

Dr. Laura Markham: Yes. So, I don't have anything against engaging with the child at mealtime to make mealtime fun, so the engagement, the storytelling in that sense. But I don't like the idea of distracting them from what they're eating because then for the rest of their life, they're not in touch with their hunger and when they're satiated. So you're turning something major around that's not just familial but cultural.

Question 9:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:30:52 This parent has a two year old, a 21 month old actually, not even two, who's having meltdowns, screaming,

throwing herself on the floor, refusing to eat, throwing stuff around. So, that is, of course, quote, normal behavior, unquote, for a child that age, we know that. And you can minimize those kinds of situations by meeting her needs as much as possible, making sure she gets fed when she's hungry and gets enough sleep, and really using your empathy to acknowledge how she's feeling, and what she wants. And here's the thing, you can often head off a tantrum like that with your empathy.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, when she's that overwhelmed and not able to regulate herself, your job is to provide the safe holding environment. You can just say, you said that she refuses to eat, so let's say you want her to stop playing and get in her high chair. And you can say, "You don't want to stop playing, you're so mad, you don't want food now, do you?" And she'll say, "No, no food." And even if she can't speak yet, receptive language goes much further than expressive language at this stage. So, she will get what you're saying and it will help her to calm down, to know that you're understanding her. And by the way, if she's so upset she's refusing to eat, that's not a good time to be feeding her anyway.

Question 10:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:32:16

The next question is from a parent who says, "Dinnertime should be a great time. We have five kids, five to 10, and instead it's usually poor behavior and it turns out to not be a great time. We've written our rules down but inevitably the kids start potty humor and loud singing and dancing and yelling and all that stuff."

I would say you have to prepare for mealtime and you have to expect mealtimes are not going to be that smooth with five children ages five to 10. I would say the first thing, always do roughhousing before you sit down to eat. Always do roughhousing and get them all laughing. Second thing, group hug before you sit down and then say, "Okay,

what are we going to do to have this be a great mealtime? What are we going to do? What are the rules? No potty talk. If somebody does potty talk, what happens? Right, they go in the bathroom and do their own potty talk by themselves. If somebody's talking and someone else talks, that's fine. Maybe we can have a talking stick." Just before you sit down, review how you're all going to have a great time and, "Give me five, group hug, group five!"

Then you're in the mealtime. Look at it as the hardest thing you've ever done. Pretend you're a kindergarten teacher and it's really hard and you have to be on, on, on. It's not going to be a great time. It's going to be a hard time, because that's the way it is. All of their stuff is going to come up at the dinner table that hasn't already come up before that. That's why you roughhouse to get some of that stuff out with laughter.

If people get up and dance, send them into their room to dance, or the bathroom. Anyone who's singing, same thing. They don't have to sit at the table and do this.

This is clearly like they are testing to see what the limits are, but also I want to say they might be bored. It might be that you want to have each kid take turns and five days a week one of them brings a topic to the table and everybody talks about that topic. At least for part of the meal. It doesn't have to be the whole meal, like for the beginning of the meal or something. Or you could do rose and thorn and everybody talks about a good part of their day and a hard part of their day. Something basically that gets everybody to be interested, because otherwise, you're asking kids to sit still, and it's too hard for them if they're bored, basically.

Question 11:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:34:37

"Your food videos are about kids who resist new foods, but what do you do when children drop familiar foods? Our four year old is down to maybe 20 or 30 foods with very little variety, and rejects all of his former backup

foods. We want to be respectful, but is this behavior too extreme to accommodate at some point? How can we diversify his diet and at what point should we seek some professional help? Also, how do we keep our food-adventurous 16 month old from copying his brother's diminished diet?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, how do you know when you need to seek professional help? Your pediatrician will tell you. Talk to your pediatrician about what your child is eating and about your child's health, and if there's a cause for concern, your pediatrician will tell you. I think your pediatrician is likely to tell you that this is very common and not to worry about it. Many parents respond by trying to add vegetables and other foods that their child won't eat, back into the diet in the form of smoothies or hiding vegetables and things that they make. I actually think that's a great idea, because it gets all the nutrients you want into your child's diet.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I also do understand the criticism, which is that, we want kids to get used to eating vegetables for instance. And so I do think you want to keep serving your child vegetables, or yogurt, or other things that maybe he's not so interested in anymore, because over time, he will come back to eating them. In order to make sure that's true, I think you want to avoid pressuring your son to eat, it will always backfire, because when we try to pressure kids, it always turns into a power struggle. And a power struggle with someone else about their body is not one you're going to win.

Question 12:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:36:23

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My three and a half year old is a picky eater. What tools or words can I use to help at mealtimes? I think I've tried everything. My seven year old eats anything new, no problem and never fusses about what I make." So I would say, your basic framework here is you supply only healthy

food, your child eats however much they want of whatever they want. Children don't starve themselves.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, if your child doesn't like what you've made at mealtimes, I would always have an alternative. Your child can always go make themselves a peanut butter sandwich or an almond butter sandwich with whole wheat bread and a banana. As long as there's protein and a vegetable, like raw carrots right out of the bag, then your child can use that and it's always the same thing every night, it shouldn't change, there shouldn't be a short order cook situation where you make special things or your child's allowed to make special things. It's always exactly the same meal, like an unflavored yogurt and some carrots out of the bag, if they don't like what you've made. And otherwise they can eat as much of what you've made as they want and that's it. And don't worry about how much they eat, they're not going to starve themselves.

Question 13:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:37:37

This parent says, "My 10 year old is usually not hungry, he finds it boring to sit and eat. He always finds distractions to get up. We've tried timers, reminders, reward charts, had many calm conversations and try to get his input on finding a solution. This is a problem because he is underweight. When we tell him it is time to move on, he has huge meltdowns and expresses a lot of fear about getting malnourished."

So, I'm not sure how calm your conversations could have been if he has meltdowns and expresses a lot of fear of being malnourished. Sounds to me like he is anxious about the fact that you're anxious about whether he's getting enough nourishment.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, first of all, a lot of our feelings about food come from our own childhoods. If our parents had experiences where they were hungry as children, they are very invested in us eating and they give us the message that eating is super

important. And then when we grow up, we treat our children the same way. So a lot of our focus on our children eating is really not about our children's health, it's about our own anxiety.

So I know it's natural to want your child to eat well and to focus on trying to get them to eat as much healthy food as possible, but that's not actually healthy. What's healthy is to teach children to notice their own inner compass and to listen to it.

Children don't starve themselves. And in fact, the research shows that as long as they're given a variety of foods, and they're exposed to a variety of foods repeatedly, they have to sometimes be exposed 20 times before they'll try a food. And as long as the adults around them are eating those same foods and enjoying them. And as long as children aren't given sweets, that's really important, or junk food like chips and french fries. If all those things are in place, children will choose a balanced, healthy diet.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now, they may not eat any vegetables one day and only vegetables the next day. But as long as they have only healthy choices, they will choose to eat healthy food. So our job is to make sure that everything in the house, that they're being offered for food, is healthy and that it's a variety. Their job is to decide how much to eat. And their bodies know how much is healthy for them to eat. It's just not up to us to decide how much their bodies need. There's no way we could possibly know that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

It also raises a question for me when you say your son is underweight. Children are not considered underweight unless they are in the bottom fifth percentile for their weight compared to their height. We don't just look at how much they weigh compared to other kids their age, we also look at their height so that they're proportionate. So we use body mass index, at least in the United States, we do, and I think in most countries at this point, which is comparing a child's weight to their height. A body mass index less than the fifth percentile for that age group indicates that a child is underweight.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, first of all, if your pediatrician is telling you that he is in the fifth percentile, then he's underweight. If not, there's nothing wrong. There are people who are in the 20th percentile or the 25th percentile, that's not a problem. So it doesn't mean they're malnourished at all.

I'm questioning this because I often hear from parents who are worried that their child doesn't eat as much as they think their child should eat, and they think their child looks a little thin. But in fact, the pediatrician isn't worried at all and the child is perfectly healthy.

So I'd start there and examine if this is your own issue or if your child actually has an issue because it does sound to me like he is getting a complex about this, because, clearly, there is something going on with him where when you say, it's time to move on, he's had enough time to eat, then he has a huge meltdown and expresses a lot of fear about being malnourished. That says to me that someone has given him this message. And it sounds to me like there's a whole power struggle over eating in your house and he's quite frightened about this.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You'll notice that's not enough for him to override his bodily signals. His bodily signals tell him he's done eating. And we want kids to pay attention to those bodily signals. We don't want to override their bodily signals. So your question to me is, how do we get him to eat? And my answer is, I don't think that's your goal. I think your goal is to ask him how he feels in his body. Does he feel hungry or not? If the pediatrician tells you that in fact he's malnourished, and he's in the fifth percentile for his body mass index, then absolutely, you are going to want to help him gain some weight. And I'm no dietician, but usually what is recommended at this point is adding healthy oils to the food. So avocados, and almond butter, and olive oil, other oils usually are the things that help the child to gain weight and to more optimally function.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But remember, you're not just trying to help a child gain weight. You don't want to just feed him carbs, sugary snacks and fruit juices, that's not going to help him. And

it's unlikely that he needs protein. Again, I'm no dietitian, but apparently, most experts feel that kids already do get enough protein, that's not the problem. And so I think if you have a kid who's seriously not getting enough nourishment and is in the fifth percentile, you should get a dietitian to work with you and come up with a program that looks at your child's whole gut biome, their whole internal workings of their gut, their stomach and their digestive tract, to make sure that they have the right flora and fauna going on, and that they're getting the right input. It's definitely not just a matter of having them sit at the table long enough to eat more food, it's actually a matter of addressing their entire biology.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, I'm not a dietitian, but if your child is actually in the fifth percentile, then you absolutely want a dietitian to work with you. And dietitians who work with children are also experienced in working with kids to involve them in cooking delicious food. So they have the incentive to try new foods and to enjoy eating. It's not about timers and reward charts. I can't imagine a way to make you enjoy your food less than a timer or a reward chart. And certainly a power struggle with a child about their body is a power struggle you can never win.

So, I would say, back up and reframe this, really look at what the issue is. If your child is fine as far as the pediatrician is concerned, back off. Start asking him questions like, How does your body feel? Does your body want any more food? And reassure him that you were misinformed when you told him that you thought he'd be malnourished because you don't want to give him a complex about that.

Question 14:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:45:17

Our next question is from a parent who says, "We eat dinner together every night. My son doesn't eat much, no matter what we serve. He eats great breakfast and lunch, but little at dinner, where most of our protein and vegetables are served. He has a history of low iron so

letting it go is really not an option. He will request a snack at bedtime, but he needs to get to sleep. If he doesn't have a snack, he wakes up very early for breakfast.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, it sounds to me like you're doing a great thing in eating together every night, but by then your son is either not hungry because he's been snacking or too tired to eat. So it sounds to me like this might be a case of his needs being in conflict with your assumptions about the way your family should eat. So here's what I mean by that. If you serve protein at breakfast, which is in fact a great time to serve it, very good for your body. And of course lunch, and you have vegetables at lunch, and even at breakfast. Then, since he eats a good breakfast and a good lunch, if it's about him being too tired to eat at dinner, then this solves that problem, right? He would get vegetables and protein in his first two meals of the day. And if he's too tired at dinner, then it's not really an issue. You don't really care what he eats for dinner. I mean, obviously, it needs to be healthy. You never let children eat unhealthy food. But at least you're not worried about how much he eats.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And I think snack time at bedtime is completely fine up until a certain age. If you build it into your schedule, you'll have time to do it. And often kids do eat better at bedtime with bedtime looming than they do at dinner when they're distracted. So, I personally, with my kids, found it to be a great time to get healthy food into them. And I've heard that from many parents that I've talked to about this issue. But, you don't make a new meal at snack time, you serve them what's left over from dinner, you just reheat it. So, if they're not eating the dinner because they're distracted, then they get it at bedtime, but they're not getting a choice to eat a different kind of dinner at snack time.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So in my answer so far I've assumed that he's not eating because he's not hungry. But in fact, it's entirely possible that he's not eating because he doesn't like the dinner food, which is more likely to include protein and vegetables, whereas maybe for breakfast, like a lot of kids, he gets cereal and milk, which doesn't have that much protein in it and is just carbs and often is sugary, or maybe

he gets toast and jam. So if it's a question of him not eating dinner because he doesn't like the food, but he likes the breakfast and lunch food, you still have an issue of how do you get him to eat healthy food? And here's what the research says about that. When we give children healthy choices, and only healthy choices, then they eat those foods sooner or later, period.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So there is no reason to give children empty calories and empty carbs ever. Children do not need sweets, really ever, but they'll get them sometimes and that's fine. Sweets for special occasions is fine. But on a daily basis, every breakfast and every lunch should have some protein in it, and should have something with some vitamins, i.e., vegetables or fruit. But vegetables are harder for kids to get used to, so it's really important to expose them to vegetables on a regular basis. And when people say, "My child won't eat that," usually what they mean is, they stuffed their child full of snacks in between meals just to keep them happy. So crackers or other kinds of carbs is usually what people use for snacks, or things that are worse like cookies.

Dr. Laura Markham:

If you do need to give your child a snack in between meals because you're picking them up from school and they're starving and you're on your way somewhere, have a hard boiled egg, have an almond butter sandwich, have some sliced turkey, something that has some protein in it, and maybe even some vegetables. I would be careful about anything they could choke on if you're in transit, like they're in a stroller or they're in a car seat and you're not right there with them. I probably wouldn't give them a carrot stick if you think they could choke on it. But there's no reason they can't have some cut up veggies.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I want to add, you mentioned that your concern stems partly from your child's history of low iron. One of the very most common causes of low iron is too much milk, high milk intake. Because often when kids drink a lot of milk, which they find satisfying or we've trained them to do, they don't eat as much food at dinner. And so to make sure he gets enough iron, he needs to eat beans, and

spinach, and eggs, maybe some kale if he can eat that, sea food, red meat if your family eats that, you get my point. You don't want him filling up on milk once he's had his sufficient amount of it for the day. You want him to actually eat some foods that have iron.

Dr. Laura Markham:

If he doesn't like the foods I've just mentioned, there are lots of other foods like hummus from chickpeas, sunflower seeds, dates that have smaller amounts of iron but that children often like. But I think the bottom line here is children will not starve themselves if you give them only healthy foods, they will eat those healthy foods. So I would just **not** give him food that does not have iron in it and the other nutrients he needs, and I would give him the healthy foods that we're talking about for breakfast and for lunch. Once he starts eating those, it's not going to matter what he does at dinner.

Question 15:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:51:17

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My child is an extremely fussy eater. She won't eat vegetables apart from one sprig of broccoli or a sprig of asparagus or one green bean on rare occasions. She eats a small amount of fruit, and very little meat. So of course, I tend to give her the dinner she will eat. She will happily go without, as hunger doesn't seem to bother her. She gets minimal sweet stuff, but I am worried about her nutrition."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, I know you are not alone with your five year old. There are so many parents listening at this moment who are nodding and saying, that describes my child. And yes, this description is classic at least for American children. The problem though, is that you're giving her the dinner she will eat. No wonder you're worried about her nutrition. A five year old is not capable of making her own nutritional decisions. What a five year old **is** capable of, is deciding how much to eat of the healthy foods we give them, as long as there's a variety of foods served regularly.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So when you say you feed her what she'll eat, if you're like most parents who say that, what they're really telling me is, "I give her pasta every night because that's what she'll eat. And yeah, she'll take a little Parmesan on it or whatever and I have to settle for that as the protein." When I say give them healthy choices and they'll eat a healthy diet, remember I'm saying, it has to have a variety. Pasta every night is not a variety. So, our job is to provide healthy choices with a variety of healthy foods. Their job is to decide how much to eat. Start giving your child healthy meals, she will not starve herself, and she will even eat the vegetables if you keep exposing her to them, and making them delicious, and enjoying them yourself.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The research is pretty clear about this. So I realize that in the United States, we often take for granted that kids will not eat healthy diets, but I don't think it's necessary. I've seen many, many families that have very healthy diets and they follow some basic practices, the ones I've just described to you. So I'm excited to recommend a book to you, it's by Karen Lebillon. That's L-E-B-I-L-L-O-N, and I may be pronouncing it wrong. The book is called, *French Kids Eat Everything*. And she cites a lot of research in the book and it also talks about how her children started from a place where they had very limited diets and would not touch vegetables, and became like French kids who eat everything. So I highly recommend that book to anybody who has a picky eater.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But the bottom line is your daughter won't starve herself. If you're worried about her nutrition, which it sounds like you are, stop feeding her the dinner she'll eat and start feeding her the dinners that are good for her. And eventually she will eat them. You don't have to go cold turkey, so to speak, you can, if you're feeding her pasta every night, start feeding her other things besides the pasta and smaller and smaller portions of pasta, or pasta only on certain nights of the week. I mean, she is five so she'll understand that pasta is once a week or pasta is twice a week, so you don't have to be authoritarian about it at all. The most important thing is in fact, making mealtime fun, making it enjoyable, savoring the food. Get

her involved in the cooking prep, get her involved in choosing the foods. Slowly but surely work toward a goal of finding five vegetables she likes. But it's not your job to find the five vegetables, it's her job. She's old enough at five to find five vegetables she likes. That can be a goal that you set up in your family and that you support her to work toward.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you're not setting up a power struggle at all, but you have clarity about whose job it is to do what. It's your job to make sure she has a variety of healthy food and it's her job to decide how much of it to eat.

Question 16:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:55:33

Our next question is from a parent who says, "One of the most challenging times of our day is mealtimes, breakfast, lunch, dinner and any snack times in between. Our oldest two children often stand on our bench seating, leave the kitchen to play, bring books and toys to the table, play with their food, get loud and disrespectful and get into each other's space. This can start as silliness but quickly escalate. How can we make mealtimes a time to reconnect and create a routine where the kids see this time as sacred and protected? They're two, four, and six."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So a two year old will take cues from the four year old and the six year old. A six year old and a four year old are old enough to understand the routine of the meal. And the routine of the meal does not need to include standing up while you're eating, leaving the kitchen to play, books and toys at the table, or playing with your food, or loudness and disrespect. So the first thing to do is have a family meeting where you discuss what you're going to have mealtimes be like. Mealtimes are going to be calm, and peaceful, and sacred. How could you make dinnertime to be more that way?

Dr. Laura Markham: Brainstorm about it, write down what everybody says. I strongly recommend lighting a candle and playing soft music, and having the kids participate in setting the table and making the table look beautiful, maybe with some flowers on it. When it feels special, children are more likely to act like it's special. I also recommend that parents sit at the table, no jumping up and down to get things, no getting something done while the children are eating. Right? It needs to be parents and children sitting together where you're role modeling how to act.

Dr. Laura Markham: And of course, as you brainstorm, on that list, you'll have a discussion about whether people can get up and play during the meal? And the answer is, no. The answer is, once you sit down to eat, it's a sacred connection with each person and a time to savor and enjoy each other and the food. So that means no jumping up to do something else. Parents can never have phones at the table. Children shouldn't have toys at the table or books. And then you make an agreement. If the kids are done eating, can they get up and leave the table? Sure, but then they're done eating. And if they haven't eaten enough and they're hungry later, that's really a shame because they'll have to wait until the next meal. Then you enforce these agreements.

Dr. Laura Markham: And as you do it, you're empathic about it. And you say, we're making meals special. So you can be nice about it and enforce your boundary, just like you enforce any other limit. "I know you wish you could keep playing, right now it's mealtime. When we're done, you can play some more or tomorrow morning," or whatever. And when you say the children want to stand on your bench seating, I would also ask you, do they have a comfortable seat to sit in? Most children are expected by adults to sit in uncomfortable chairs that are not the right size for them in relation to the table. So I would definitely suggest that you check that out and just make sure that your children have high enough seating that's comfortable for them.

Dr. Laura Markham: Children need a place to put their feet so their feet are not just dangling, because when feet dangle it's uncomfortable

and naturally they're going to fidget or want to stand and get into a different position. But most bench seating is not going to work for children that are the age of yours because they're just not tall enough. Bench seating is set up for adults. So unless you have something on that bench that is firm, that is a seat, like a booster seat that's on the bench for them, it's going to be hard for them to sit comfortably at the table.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You mentioned silliness. Often in our culture, we expect children to sit still when their bodies need to move. So I would, prior to dinner, make sure your kids get a chance to rough house, preferably get some time outside to run around, then they're more able to sit still without being silly. And finally, don't miss the book that I just recommended, *French Kids Eat Everything*, because that has a lot in it about how to create meals as a sacred space. Something French culture is really good at, and something the rest of us probably can learn a lot from.

Question 17:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:00:08

My older child is a picky eater with lots of tantrums during meal times. "I want more, everything is the wrong color, texture, I want plain food." He gets to the table and he starts screaming. I usually take him away from the table, go to another room and try to calm him down. I tried to set empathic limits that we don't scream at the table, but nothing seems to work. How can I deal with screaming during mealtimes? And do you have any tips for picky eaters?

Dr. Laura Markham:

So from your son's actions, it sounds to me like he might have sensory issues with food. So imagine if you were hungry and you sat down to eat, but then everything was the wrong texture, or taste, or color, you might get worried about starving, you would get super dysregulated if you were hungry. And I'm wondering if that's what's happening with your son. So I'd focus on two things. First,

reassure him he's not going to starve, you know he's hungry, you're going to help him find something that he wants to eat. I think that will help him regulate better at the table. Right now you're setting a limit about screaming at the table, but that doesn't really help him regulate. He's screaming because he's hungry and he's scared, and he knows there's a limit about screaming at the table but he's hungry and scared. So in his mind, that outweighs any limits that you have for whatever your reasons might be, because this is an emergency. So, in general, if you can reassure him, he's less likely to scream.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And also, of course, work very hard all day long to build connection and trust with him and he'll be less likely to go right to screaming at the table. He'll start with unhappy words at least before he starts screaming.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The second thing I would do is to work to find food that he will reliably eat. I think that's probably sort of a big project. You asked about tips for picky eaters. If you haven't read Ellyn Satter's book, *Child of Mine, Feeding With Love and Good Sense*, start there. I also suggest the blog, Mealtime Hostage, and the book by Marianne Jacobson it's called *Picky to Powerful*. So start now on trying to find foods for him and really work with him to empower him to find foods he likes. This might sound like a lot of work. Our society usually just tells kids to swallow what we give them. But there's always a reason children won't eat. So for very picky eaters like your son, there are actually strategies. Jacobson outlines some in her book, and that will help you resolve this issue.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Finally, before you sit down to eat, always involve your child in setting up his food. That way he will look forward to the meal and he won't be screaming in surprise and fear when he sees what's for dinner.

Question 18:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:02:59

And now we have a couple of questions about nursing your baby. A parent asks, "What's the best way to stop

breastfeeding and how long should we continue?" I think you continue for as long as you and your child are both enjoying it. The verb, to wean, actually comes from a Hebrew word meaning to ripen. So it's designed to be an organic, natural process like any other kind of ripening. And sometimes children do wean themselves, and sometimes parents decide to encourage weaning, and babies do adapt. Nursing a baby for the first year is obviously highly recommended by doctors; it's the best way to feed your baby. And even after that, toddlers get a great deal of benefit out of the milk, nutritionally, for their immune system. There's a lot of research showing that nursing a toddler is good for them.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But no guilt, no shame, no blame. When you're ready to stop, just make sure it's a very gradual process. In this answer, I'm not going to walk you through the process, which is long, but I will say that if you go to the Aha! Parenting website and you put weaning W-E-A-N-I-N-G into the search box, you'll find my article, "13 Tips for Gentle Weaning." The most important thing is to make it a gradual process. And I walk you through how to do that in this article.

Question 19:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:04:32

A parent is asking, "How do I help my boys get through the morning routine without asking to be breastfed a lot? Do I need to wean them entirely?" Well, I would say your boys are old enough to be weaned entirely, but I don't think that's a decision you need to make right now. Weaning should be a gradual process. And one of the things you do in that gradual process is to stop nursing so much. That means that in the morning, when your boys wake up, maybe they can nurse. But then that's it. Once they're out of bed, no more nursing in the morning routine. And you set that as a limit, just like you set any other limit, and you stick to it.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And the article I just mentioned on weaning does talk about how to do that. Your boys won't like it. You'll have

to explain it to them. But they will get used to it. And I think that's the first step in reducing the number of times a day they nurse. And over time, you will find that you are moving toward weaning just because they nurse so many fewer times, because you've set limits around when they nurse. And that's a very good way to move toward weaning gradually. And by the time you do, your children will be used to the idea. They won't be depending on it so much.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, if you're thinking you might want to wean in the next year, which I'm betting you do, please go to this article on weaning and use it to guide you as you move in that direction.

And that's all our questions for today. Thank you for listening and I hope this was helpful. If you still have a burning question that wasn't answered on this audio, please submit it for possible inclusion on my podcast. Just go to ahaparenting.com/podcast and leave your question as a voice memo. This is Dr. Laura Markham, wishing you less drama and more love. Goodbye for now.