

Division of Responsibility with Ellyn Satter

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SUMMARY

Ellyn Satter discusses the Division of Responsibility (DOR) in feeding, emphasizing the roles of parents and children in the eating process. Parents are responsible for what, when, and where food is offered, while children decide how much to eat and whether to eat. Satter addresses common parental concerns about children's eating habits and encourages a relaxed approach to food, highlighting the importance of modeling enjoyment in eating.

- The Division of Responsibility (DOR) allows parents to control the food environment while children choose their intake.*
- Parents should provide a variety of foods, including familiar favorites and new options, without pressure.*
- Children learn to enjoy foods by seeing their parents enjoy them, and this process can take time.*
- Nutritional adequacy is often met even when children have limited diets; dietary quality is more about disease prevention.*
- Grazing can be problematic if it leads to unhealthy eating patterns; structured meals are preferred for sociability and nutritional balance.*
- Parents should avoid restricting foods to prevent children from developing unhealthy relationships with food.*
- Enjoying food and creating a positive eating environment are crucial for fostering healthy eating habits in children.*
- Trusting children to regulate their own intake can lead to better long-term eating behaviors.*

Hello and welcome to the Your Parenting Mojo podcast. And today we're continuing our series of episodes on the intersection of parenting and food. And we're here for a conversation today with none other than Ellyn Satter. In the online parenting communities that I'm in, eating questions come up all the time. Children refusing meals, children only eating 10 foods, they want snacks all the time, they're waking up in the middle of the night because they're hungry. And each time one of these posts comes up, you can bet that within the first 10 comments, somebody's going to answer Ellyn Satter division of responsibility as if there is nothing else to say about the subject. And so I've used division of responsibility quite a bit with my own daughter, and I would say we don't have significant challenges related to eating, but there have always been parts of it that I haven't fully understood. Like can we really relax around vegetables as much as DOR says we can? And what if we're pretty sure that our child would not stop eating cookies if we were to allow them an unlimited supply at snack time?

And what happens if they just go to the pantry and help themselves? So Ellyn is a nutritionist, a family therapist, she's an author, a trainer, a publisher, and a consultant. During her 40-year clinical career, she worked first as a registered dietitian in an outpatient medical practice, and then as a psychotherapist in private practice specializing in family-based treatment of eating disorders. Her first book was *Child of Mine, Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, and has been followed by a variety of others on various aspects of feeding children over the years.

Welcome, Ellyn. It's such a privilege to have you here. Well, thank you, Jen. It's fun to be here with you. And so I should note that we're going to very briefly start by describing what division of responsibility or DOR is, but because this is such a popular and well-known approach, we're really going to spend most of our time in the nitty-gritty questions that parents who have read the book already and still are struggling with some aspect of implementing it have. So, Ellyn, I wonder if you could kick us off maybe just with a brief introduction to what is division of responsibility so we're all starting on the same foot and then we can dive deeper from there.

Thank you. Thank you so much. Yes, the division is the Satter division of responsibility in feeding. Uh here after known as S D O R Satter division of responsibility. If you're Googling it, do division of responsibility in feeding and it is going to bring it up and that'll bring you to a lot of resources that you can use but it sounds like this group of people is not resource poor. In fact, you're resource rich.

The division of responsibility in feeding for toddlers on up through the adolescent years is that parents do the what, when, and where of feeding and children do the how much and whether of eating. That means that parents are in control of the menu the timing. The parents are the ones that determine when uh and where the snacks and the meals and sit-down snacks are going to be.

They're the ones who draw who uh make mealtimes pleasant for children first of all by being there themselves and sharing the same food as they're with their children. And also um by um taking interest in kids and avoiding negative topics and so on. Just plain making it a pleasant family place to be. Um and then once parents have and eat and enjoy their own food. That's that's a biggie. Uh and choose food that they enjoy. Putting on the table food that they themselves find richly rewarding to shop for, prepare, and eat.

Um, and after that, it's up to the children. Then, the parents' a very important task is to turn over to the child um the the decision of what to eat from what the parents have put on the table or at the meal. If the table is a blanket on the floor, that's fine, too. Children get to choose what to eat from what parents have provided for them. They get to decide Well, they don't decide. That's a bad word. They get to determine because it's not a cognitive thing. It's uh instinctive.

Children get to determine how much to eat of what is put in in front of them. And they um as they learn and grow, you know, they get to enjoy being there with their parents and their rest of the family. So, the parent does the what, when, and where, and the child does the how much and whether. And it elaborates from there. And And Jen, I have an idea you're going to um ask me questions, so let me elaborate. So, I'll stop talking and Perfect. Thank you. I'll invite you into the act.

And so, okay. So, so I think a lot of parents uh even the ones who are hearing this for the first time are thinking, "Yes. Yes, I want that." And so, let's get into uh what are some of the ways that parents can start to struggle with this? And And I know that uh children's health is one thing that parents are very concerned about, both their health now and also their health in the future. And the impression that I get from reading your books, both Child of Mine and and your other books as well, is that you're not so worried about this. And And I think what it comes down to for a lot of parents is around food selection. And And you you specifically say um EC Satter is

based on the principle that internal cues of hunger, appetite, and satiety actually I don't know if I'm saying that right. Satiety. Thank you.

If properly attended to are reliable and can be depended on to inform food selection, guide energy balance, and body weight. And so, you know, I I talked to my daughter recently and she said, you know, you know what would make every food better? And I said, what? And she said, 5 lbs of sugar. And so, how do we get from that kind of conversation to this, you know, informing food selection where where a child is is taking on more and more of this responsibility?

Uh-huh. Well, Jen, how old is your daughter? She is about to turn seven. Uh-huh. Yeah, that's great. What a What a good fine idea. Okay. Well, the you know, it all comes back to the principle that children will learn to eat the food that their parents eat. The parent the food their parents enjoy. Now, if parents are putting vegetables on the table because they enjoy the vegetables, if they're preparing them in ways that they genuinely enjoy eating them, that sooner or later children are going to eat those vegetables that parents enjoy. Now, the big caveat is sooner or later. Because you have uh some kids um well, kids have three different ways of learning to like unfamiliar food.

Um the one way that we all dream about and that uh and think every child should be this way, but they're not, is that they take an interest in unfamiliar food. They'll very willingly try it. Um they might not eat it right at first, but you know, they're very receptive. And I had a child like that, and he was a delight. He just was so much fun to feed because he'd say, what's that? Let me try it.

And then you have the type who's a little bit skeptical, you know, slow to warm up. It's like, "What is this?" Um and you know, if you're if you're very careful, and you know, sometimes you can get away with saying to a child like that, "Well, try it. You might like it." Or you know, the the routine goes, "What is that? I don't like it." And then you say, "Well, you know, you try it, you might like it."

But you have to take no for an answer because if you don't, then that's pressure and he for sure isn't going to try it. So maybe he'll try it, maybe he won't. And then after he tries it six or eight or 23 times, he he it's familiar and he enjoys it and he eats it voluntarily uh voluntarily, but not always, you know? One of my kids went cold turkey on orange juice. He loved orange juice and then when he was 18 months old, he stopped drinking orange juice. I was like, "Why aren't you drinking orange juice?" Well, the orange juice was just off his his you know, screen. He didn't want orange juice anymore. So, go figure. It's what kids do. They're They are so absolutely erratic.

So when we say a child enjoys a food, that means that he might eat it um uh some if not the majority of the times it shows up on the table. Then you have the other type of child who absolutely does not eat a food for years and years and years and years, even though it's on the table. Um when my skeptical child was 11, he uh picked up the bowl of tabbouleh and he said, "Well, I think it's time for me to try this."

11. And uh and my colleagues and you know, people we communicate with on on Facebook, they they use

numbers like 23. You know, my child was 23. And blogger, the ESI president, says her son started eating vegetables when he was uh he was 23. And he said, "And you know, I just I don't know why. I just hadn't been exposed to these before." His mother felt like killing him.

It had to be his idea, you know. And it took that long. And parents tell the story that, you know, one day the child puts broccoli on his plate and eats it. And you know, and they just you know, they don't say a word. They just say, "Oh, ooh. Look, did you see that?" And so, you know, the parents really have the deck stacked against them because children give every evidence of not doing a decent job of eating. But in reality, you know, they're very tuned in to their hunger and fullness.

They're very tuned in to their appetite. In fact, I think their taste buds are so sensitive that we can't even imagine. And so, for them to gradually learn to eat a food is something that is just natural for them. They they also um tire of even favorite food and eat a variety. And so, even though they seemingly ate the same thing all the time all the time, you know, the 10 favorite foods, that as long as nobody's pressuring them to eat a certain food or eat their vegetables before they can have this or that, um eventually they're going to tire of that preferred food and go looking for uh variety. Okay. Yeah, so I wonder if we can pause there because I am guessing there are a number of parents listening right now who are thinking my kids been eating pretty much nothing but chicken nuggets and white bread for maybe 3 years now.

Well, are we waiting until they're 23 for some shift to occur? Well, this parent is making an error in feeding. Okay. Um, because, you know, in the the family menu, chicken nuggets are simply not going to show up at every meal. And so, that this parent is limiting the menu to foods the child readily accepts. And so, you know, and so you can't how do you find the middle ground because you can't traumatize a child with a sadistic menu where everything is unfamiliar, but on neither should you as restrict the menu to only familiar foods. And so, the happy compromise is to be considerate without catering.

That is, um, chicken nugget shows up occasionally. The child gets lucky, his favorite food is there. The bread is there every time. You know, the you don't, um, you you have one food on the table that the child readily accepts and generally eats. And gives every appearance of enjoying. So, uh, one or two dishes might often times it's start starchy food that the child can enjoy like bread or rice or noodles or potatoes or, you know, some kind of starchy food.

Um, many children, uh, I think fruit is on that list too, although it, uh, it amazes me that some children seem to subsist on fruit for, uh, a long time and little of anything else, but you know, I'd I'd put fruit on the table. If it's too expensive, then the parent can sort of limit the fruits so everybody gets their share and then it's over and then has that that readily available food be a starchy food which is generally less expensive.

Um and so here you you provide a variety of food, main dish, a fruit or vegetable or both, a starchy food or two or three um and milk and then you know, whatever passes for bread. Every culture has a bread, you know, the Asian's bread is is uh is rice. And then you let the child pick and choose even if he only eats bread. And that first night thing, right? Even if they only eat bread. Exactly. Even cuz I'm serving a balanced meal but the child's just

eating bread.

I Where How do we get from child just eating bread to beyond that? You trust the child. You trust that the child eventually will get around to eating something in addition to bread. That the child will tire of even these favorite foods and go seeking an alternative. Um and you know, nobody said the division of responsibility was easy. It sounds easy but it's not easy and where it gets hard is where you have to have this steady nerve and a leap of faith that says if you're doing your job as a parent then you know, over time your child will learn to eat a variety of food.

In the short run, your child will eat as much as he or she needs in order to grow consistently. In the long run, you know, that wide the the child will learn to eat as wide a variety of food as you eat. Mhm. And so that's you know, that you enjoy. Yeah. Enjoy. That is the big clinker. Now, if you're forcing yourself to eat broccoli because it's good for you, your child isn't going to learn to eat broccoli.

Um yeah, yeah, you better put some cheese sauce on that broccoli so you can enjoy it and then your child will too. Um and I think that enjoyment is so critical and um I I think I was reading, I can't remember if it was in your book or somebody else's uh where they were talking about uh nutri- the development of wording around nutrition standards and the the word was going to be enjoy a certain amount of and somebody said, "Oh no, we can't do that. We we can't imply that people are actually enjoying eating."

You need to eat a certain amount of. Yeah, that's right. Yeah, I think Well, I'm sure many people have commented on that. I remember writing that in Secrets of Feeding the a healthy family that the committee just decided that using the word enjoy would be giving license to this wild abandon with And who knew where where things would go after Where where it would go, yeah. Okay, and so I want to bring this back to the idea of health um because you have uh written in Child of Mine, depending on the survey you consult, uh children get anywhere from 75 to almost 100% of their minimum fruits and vegetables and uh that's sort of contrary to evidence that I've been able to find from a number of other countries. And so I think if children were getting that, like if I could see a child getting that amount of vegetables, I'd be like, "Yeah, this is great. I'm doing this." But but I'm seeing a disconnect between what these uh bodies that are supposed to be looking out for our health are telling us to eat and what a child who is eating bread for dinner uh every night is actually eating. How do we bridge that gap? Yeah.

Well, Jen, that that's like saying if I knew my child was going to graduate from MIT, then I wouldn't be so worried about his math scores. Uh-huh. And so, you know, you you just really can't uh you you can't know. You have to trust. You have to do your jobs and then trust. And so, it depends on which study you're reading. And I you know, there's a difference between dietary quality and nutritional adequacy. Nutritional adequacy is a real thing. It is children getting the the protein, the calories, the fat, the vitamins and minerals they need in order to be healthy and grow properly.

Mhm. And that is actually rather a low number. It's like five fruits and vegetables as child-size servings. Everything counts, even the much maligned potatoes, even if they're even more maligned french fried. Um

Yeah. And so, everything counts. And then dietary quality is what is defined by the dietary guidelines. And that's where you get into, you know, six or eight servings a day of fruits and vegetables. And when, you know, the articles come out and they say that children are doing poorly in terms of dietary quality, that's what that means. That they're not managing to get eat as much as these inflated recommendations say that they're going to eat.

But in terms of satisfying their nutritional needs, children actually do quite well. And you know, we could do the battling references where we sort of bring one reference in and then the other one that says this one says and that one says. You know, I have a couple of references from NHANES with uh uh same study and nutritional health and uh national health and nutrition examination survey, I believe it is.

It's uh happens every 5 years or so, and this huge number of people adults and children are surveyed in terms of the nutritional quality of their adequacy of their diet what they're eating and how they're doing nutritionally. And the one author says uh depending, you know, takes the data and says children are doing really poorly uh based on nutritional quality, and then another one says they're actually doing quite well Mhm. um in terms of nutritional quality. So, yeah. But, you know, every dietitian who has worked with children in any detail, particularly toddlers who are the ultimate of erratic with respect to their eating, Mhm.

um does a week-long uh 24-hour recall on these kids, and uh does a nutrition calculation, and is just amazed uh at the overall nutritional adequacy of this child's diet. And, you know, they're eating a finger food uh fingerful of this, a bite of that, you know, a whole bunch of something else. Mhm. And it's when you put it all together, they they actually do quite well.

But, I I can see why parents are so alarmed because these kids don't go near a vegetable for years and years. They don't go near fruit. Um and some some meals, they eat hardly anything at all. Yeah. Yeah. I I just visited my granddaughter or my grandchildren, and my uh we went out for hot dogs, you know, that we had to go to the famous Coney dog place, and my my uh little granddaughter had three Coney dogs.

And she's a little skinny thing. And another meal, she doesn't eat anything at all. Mhm. And so, you know, it's amazing how they do that. I I think if you trust and let yourself be amazed, you're much better off than than if you have an agenda for trying to get things to turn out a certain way. Okay. But, challenge me again. Am I being too general? Do you want more specific? Um I think the the idea of of balancing dietary quality and nutritional quality and and that that's the first time I've I've heard those two things framed in that way and that one of the the sort of dietary quality is kind of a like why why do we even have those guidelines if the nutritional quality is adequate and children are getting what they need? Well, presumably, a nutritional adequacy is about vitamins, minerals, and so on. Overall nutritional health and well-being, growth, supporting growth, and so on.

Now, nutritional quality, presumably, says uh it concerns itself with disease prevention. Mhm. And this is kind of a bugaboo that's been around since the '70s, where the dietary guidelines was first published in and people, nutritionists, presumed to know how we were supposed to eat in order not to get heart disease and cancer and diabetes. And so, it's degenerative avoidance of degenerative disease. You know, so you have this on the one

hand and you have nutritional quality on the other.

Or you have uh nutritional adequacy on the other. And so, avoidance of degenerative disease is a real moving target. But, really has not been pinned down. It hasn't been proven that eating inflated amounts of fruits and vegetables are really going to do the trick. Um that there's the only thing that is really solid is trans fats, so of trans fats. But, um you know, we we really don't know how to eat in order to prevent uh degenerative disease.

And so, um you know, I would say it's not worth spoiling your your nutritional life in order to chase it because it's very elusive. It's very hard to figure out how you're supposed to do that. Uh but there was another point that went flitting through my mind. Um degenerative disease. Yeah, so the Anyway, it'll come back to me. The two different concepts then. Okay. And and so that speaks to kind of long-term health, but I'm also thinking about short-term health and uh you know, maybe large consumption of large amounts of sugar in the short term or um you know, eating a lot of foods that is potentially going to lead to obesity.

Um and and I know we're actually going to do a whole episode on teasing that apart, so we don't need to go in depth on that. Um but but I'm just sort of trying to get my head around uh this idea of of completely trusting the child uh within the parameters of the food that you are serving that they are going to eat uh what what they need for adequate nutritional quality and the right amount of food that they're not you know, they're going to be within a range that is uh healthy, which I'm putting in inverted commas because because we don't seem to have much of an idea what that means.

How do we navigate that? Well, I you know, something we haven't talked about yet is eating competence. Eating competence is another Satter um creation. We have the Satter eating competence model. Um and uh adults and this this is a whole theoretical construct that is tested by a validated test. Satter is tested by a validated test and we find that when parents follow Satter, the children have lower nutritional risk. Now, the test is very new, so we haven't yet determined that when or proven that when parents follow Satter, children grow best.

Uh clinically, we absolutely know it. You know, if children are growing all over the place, we look at feeding, parents are uh crossing the lines of division of responsibility, we establish Satter, children grow consistently. So, clinically we know it, but clinical research is clinical observation is always suspect. But back to back to Ellyn Satter, and so we we know um uh the eating competence model is made up of positive attitudes about eating, adults, parents now, who feel good about eating, who take an interest in unfamiliar food, uh take an interest, don't force themselves to eat a variety of food, but it's it's attitude. It's not like I have to eat the right food and avoid the wrong food. It's attitude. Taking an interest and enjoying, experimenting with food.

Regulating food intake based on internal cues of hunger, appetite, and satiety. And managing the eating context, which means having structure. Regular meals. Uh being reliable about feeding oneself and making a plan for seeing to it that you get to eat. This is eating competence and there's a test. There's a test like, I feel like it's okay to enjoy my food.

Um I eat as much as I'm hungry for. I take time to feed myself. It's These are the questions on the test. Nothing

about eating the right food and avoiding the wrong food. And so parents then who score high on the eating sat ECSI on the eating competency inventory do better. They do better across the board. They do better nutritionally. They get the nutrients they need. They do better in terms of these parameters that are supposed to be correlated with disease avoidance like more desirable blood lipids, lower blood cholesterol, lower blood sugar, and so on.

They have the same or lower BMI as other people. And they have higher nutritional quality and that then with that's the artificial one that I was saying is correlated with disease avoidance. So if they're doing well on nutritional quality, you know they're doing well on nutritional adequacy. Now when parents are eating competent they do better with feeding their children. They're more likely to follow the division of responsibility in feeding. And their children are have lower nutritional risks. So you know it really all comes back to that adult management of the feeding context.

And so if parents are doing a good job with those family meals and enjoying them themselves you can you just know that children are going to be all right. It's reminding me of so many other things in parenting where it seems like the thing to fix is the child's behavior. When actually so much of it is about what happens in here and my experience, and how I'm modeling that for my child. Yeah. Well, you you've definitely you've got it. And uh yes, it uh and of course that's such an unpopular point of view in today's world. As you say, we hear so much we're made responsible for fixing our children. I mean, parents of fat children feels uh are are ashamed. I mean, uh some kids are just fat, and these parents just feel like they've caused it, they have you know, and everybody's been critical of them, and it's the same thing. In today's world, you are supposed to raise a child who eats his vegetables. Mhm. And if you don't, shame on you. Yeah.

And so, really, you do what you can, and then you just have to let go of it. Yeah. And and I I know the answer to this from having read your uh books, but it should should a parent of a child who is fat be worried about their child's health today, or their potential outcomes in the future? Well, the the parent needs to know what kind of uh fatness the child is. Is it natural for the child, or is the child's weight accelerating? And that's how you tell the difference. So, if you have a And you know, and some kids are just relatively fat. Some grown-ups are relatively fat, and that's the way they are. They're perfectly healthy. Um and so, if you look at a child's growth curve, and he's growing, or she they they are growing consistently along a particular percentile, even if it's a high percentile, you know, even above the diagnos- diagnosable cutoffs, if that child is growing consistently, then that child is okay. And so, then your job as parent is to follow SCOR, and avoid interference. Not res- try to restrict your child, not try to get your child to be more active, not let the health professionals talk to your child about eating right or moving more, you know, that there's so much interference in today's world with respect to how much children need and what they weigh.

Um, and so, but on the other hand, if your child's been growing along at a consistent level and then suddenly, um, that child diverges upward, then you need to get to the bottom of it because something has gone wrong. Um, probably, and it, you know, it might be that the child has some medical condition, it might be that there's a crisis in the family, but whatever the source of the problem, the division of responsibility is always going to be disrupted. And so, when we do an assessment, you know, we see this pattern, we say, "What has happened

here?" You know, "What has happened?" Um, with one little boy that I'm thinking of, he was he he when he was an infant and when he was, you know, up to about 12 to 14 months, he was growing very consistently. 18 months is very consistent.

And then he started going off his growth curve. And so, the question was, you know, "What happened?" And the, um, the problem was that his, um, his mom had done a great job. His parents, they fed him on demand when he was little, they followed his cues with introducing solid food. But then when he got to be a toddler, he needed structure. And they continued to feed him on demand. They let him graze for food, they let him, you know, whatever he wanted, he got his food handouts, he fanned the refrigerator door, he had gotten to the cupboards, and it simply overwhelmed his ability to regulate his food intake, and he ate too much.

Now, nobody caught it at that point that his growth had blipped upward, but his parents came to see me when he was um oh, he was 4-year-old 4 years old, and then his growth, which, you know, had nudged him to be relatively high but consistent, it suddenly just went off his growth curve really fast. And the um the thing that had happened is that he as an as an 18-month-old as a toddler, he had learned to eat for emotional reasons, because if he got bored or if he got angry or upset about anything, he got a food handout. And so, rather than learning to tolerate his feelings in the absence of food, it was always connected with food.

And so, in when he was 4 years old, the family got into a serious crisis, the parents had a had a decision to make, and they just couldn't make it. And so, the tension in the household went on and on and on. And that little kid, you know, like any child was a barometer for stress, and so he soaked it right up, and his his drive for food just became insatiable. He was continually panhandling for food, wanting food handouts, wanting wanting to eat this and that, and um and he just gained a lot of lot of weight. And as his mother said, well, she didn't like to tell him no about his food panhandling because she was afraid that he might not like her.

Um and I thought, oh boy, this is not going to go well, but I worked with them with a division of responsibility. And she did great. And in fact, I think you're you had comment about this on your script that you sent me. That we worked over several weeks and and she was really getting it. You know, she was very creative about division of responsibility and then she said, well, you know, we went to a picnic with a bunch of other families. And all the food was out on the table and you know, they called us to go and eat and of course the kids all lined up at the desserts.

I'm sure this is never happens to you, Jen. And and they they all lined up at the desserts. And she's and she said, and those kids, you know, there were some brownies there that looked really good and that's what they went for and those kids were really going after those brownies. She said, what should I do? What should I do when when that happens? And I said, well, what would you do if you weren't concerned about his weight?

And she said, well, I would have made them quit because I wanted some of those brownies and those kids were eating them. Eating them all up and I I thought, well, now there's there's great answer. You know, it's just you know, it's just common sense. And you know, and that's normal eating behavior that even if you are regularly offering uh sweets at snacks, so your kids get you know, over thinking of it as being such a big deal and and they

get kind of ho-hum about eating sweets.

Um even those kids will line up at the dessert table and uh and and you know, uh have that experience of simply being allowed to have dessert for dinner. And that's okay is what you're saying. Yep. And I'm saying that's okay. It's all it's all in a child's life. Yeah. Okay. All right. And so I think that example sort of takes us to the idea of restricting food. Um, and and I've definitely seen it in you have you have in one of your books a series of graphs of of these growth growth curves where you see the child, you know, going along normally and then either they go up and up or the parent decides, you know what, they're too high and I'm going to pull it down and then they're able to successfully lose his weight and then they just bounce right back up again.

They get right back up again. So so even even if we're not actively trying to get our child to lose weight, which it seems as though we should not be doing, we do control access to food because we buy the food. Mhm. Mhm. And so you you specifically tell us not to artificially run out of foods, but you know, I'm I'm going to buy two boxes of crackers for my daughter, the kind that she likes cuz they're expensive. I'm not going to buy any more than that. Um, where where's the line between this this artificially running out of foods that you say we shouldn't do and the restriction that, you know, I I could afford to buy a third box if I if I really wanted to, but I don't want to buy a third box. How do we navigate that uh discrepancy?

Well, that's a big subject and so let me just start into it here and say when your child gets to be 11 or 12 years old, um, uh they're going to be out in the world and there's going to be food available at friends' houses and at uh the corner store. Um, and uh lots of places this food will be available. And so uh what are you going to have to do in the previous 11 years in order for your child not to go off the deep end with buying all of these foods that you're concerned about. So, how are you going to acclimate your child to these foods?

And, you know, you certainly aren't going to just throw open the refrigerator door and let them have as much as they want of these foods whenever they want because that's going to spoil their nutritional quality of their diet. Uh but, what you can do is um incorporate these foods um regularly at meals and snacks. In fact, um say it take the matter of sweets, you know, you talked about crackers which are pretty innocuous.

Um but, maybe not. We'll have find out more about those crackers in a minute. They do have cranberries in them. Oh, so they're sort of like a cookie. Yeah, it's it's it's straddling the line between a cookie and a cracker. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay, so let's let's let's just malign you and say these are cookies. Okay. And so, um the way the way you help acclimate a child to sweets so he doesn't go off the deep end age 11 with sweets is to include dessert as part of the um the meal. But, just a single serving of dessert. So, you put everybody's dessert on the table when you set the table and let everybody eat the dessert when they want to, before, during, or after the meal. And then that's it. No more dessert.

But, um which violates the division of responsibility, right? And so, and you've also introduced scarcity cuz it's only one. And so, you've got to neutralize the scarcity and the way you do that is at periodic snack time that you put on a plate of a big plate, more than the child can eat, uh cookies or whatever this desirable food is, and let the child eat as much as they want to. Um cookies and milk, that's actually quite a good snack.

Um and you know, at first the child will eat like there's no tomorrow. Um and I eat a lot of them, but if you can keep your nerve that and do this periodically, then uh over time the child will get so they're ho-hum about sweets, and they'll eat a couple, and then they'll lose interest. So, the idea is to sort of neutralize that specialness, you know, the siren call of these high-sugar, high-fat food.

Um chips, um french fries are um are you are you really don't have to limit them in the same way because they don't compete in the same way with uh the mealtime food. I mean, you put you put a plate of cookies on at mealtime, then that competes unfairly with the vegetables. But, um you know, a bowl of potato chips does not compete in the same way. Mhm. And so, it's I work with some parents whose kids are more about salt than sugar, and they say that their child would just eat the chips if if there was an unlimited bowl of chips available.

Well, you know, I uh I guess I maybe they will at first, you know, if they And if the parent is more comfortable offering the chips at snack time as the treat food, then that's fine. Um and so, you know, it's it's a matter of any any time something becomes a forbidden food, that is restraint, and if you you restrain a child, then they're going to disinhibit at another time. They're going to eat a lot of it when your back is turned, and feel bad about it. I mean, you know, I was talking about eating competence, feeling good about eating. Well, do you want your child to to sneak around and eat food and then feel bad about it? I don't think so. You know, you want them to to grow up to be eating competent, the same as you are.

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. And and I think what I'm hearing is that a lot of this relies on us being the main provider of the food that our child eats. And and I my mind goes to a listener who's actually been on the podcast talking about her her daughter's sugar consumption. And she says that there after school the ice cream truck comes to the the playground every day. If you're in the supermarket, the cashier is handing your child a bag of gummy bears.

Child is getting fed breakfast and lunch that the school provides, and there's really no other option uh every day. And so can can this approach really coexist in an environment where the parent wants to follow it, but is not able to be the one who provides most of the food? Mhm. Mhm. Yeah. Well, um So, I think that your your person is talking about their dinner gets spoiled every day because somebody's going to show up with an ice cream bar or cookie or something like that. Is that what you're saying?

Potentially, yeah. I mean, it's not necessarily sort of the right before dinner thing. It's the constant throughout the day. This is this is just part of the cultural practices that it seems that it's into how we move through our day. There's a sugary treat at every step of it. Mhm. Mhm. Yeah. Well, I don't like that either. Um I at the same time as I think if parents can relax about the sugary treats that their kids are going to get tired of them.

Um but uh I I wonder if I mean, what you're saying is all day, every day, the child somebody is giving the child access to some kind of food that is not mealtime food. Um, yeah, I don't know I don't know how that really works. I don't know how that could actually be happening that somebody's doing that. Now, I can see going to the grocery store after food after school and somebody hands over a cookie. I can see the ice cream truck showing up at uh, showing up at the playground and, you know, parents can work with the child on that. You

know, they can just have that be their afternoon snack.

Uh, because kids are hungry after school and if they want to have their cookie at the grocery store or their or their treat on the ice cream truck, that's fine. Um, I think the challenge comes when they already had cookies for snack and for lunch at school as well. So, it's it's just constantly building and and the and the child is is always asking for sugar, you know, and and the parents wondering, well, is is the child actually experiencing scarcity since she's always asking for sugar. Mhm. Mhm.

Well, you know, whenever a child always asks for sugar, well, you know, I'd look for I'd look for a couple of things. One is I'd make sure that the parent is really being considerate without catering with meal planning. Um, because if the parent is insisting on being righteously nutritious at mealtime, then that sugar might be the only thing the child is really interested that is really interesting to eat. And so, you really hey, have to back back off and see it from the child's point of view.

Are there some foods on the table that the child really enjoys eating or is it all pretty austere? Yeah, and and having worked with her for a while actually, I think that it's not the case. I think she is she is following SDOR as closely as she can and she is providing a food at at every meal. Yeah. Right. And you know, some children are just really preoccupied with sweets. They think about them all day long. They long for them. They want them. They wonder about when the next time they can have their sweets. And with that child, I think in terms of offering sweets at almost every snack.

And you know, working encouraging the child to uh um save their Well, you know, that their after school would be the snack. The cookie at the grocery store would be the snack. Asking the child, "Now, is that enough? Did you get uh enough to eat for your snack?" And if the child doesn't get enough with the cookie at the grocery store, then, you know, getting some more cookies or bringing them home and having them with milk at at the meal. So, you you know, you're really um making sure that you're neutralizing the scarcity. Mhm. Um and reassuring the child that there will be times that they can have as much sweets as they want.

And also being clear with the child, you know, we have structure here. You just simply cannot eat all the time. And no, you can't get in the refrigerator and get your own snack unless you've earned it. And a child earns this, once again, when they get to be 11 or 12 years old and they have been compliant with the family structure around eating. And with um you know, showing up at mealtime on time uh at mealtime pleasantly and devoting themselves to eating there and the same at snack time. There's a certain point at which um children can begin to provide for themselves in terms of food selection. And so, if they've earned this by, you know, taking interest in unfamiliar food and um uh being business-like at mealtime and doing the most of their eating there, then, you know, children can start to provide for themselves at snack time.

And that's the point at which, you know, they can get their food and sit down at the table and eat it. So, they eat it and they get done eating and then that's it until the next meal or the next snack. They They can't just cruise and eat while they do their homework or watch TV. It's eat and get it over with. Yeah. And so so you're talking about this kind of arrangement coming in at around 11 or 12. And and I I work with some parents who have

children who are younger than that, but are very much sort of getting into the you know, the parent tries to say, "Well, I'd like you to ask me before you go and get something from the fridge."

And the child says, "Well, no, I'm not going to ask you cuz you'd say no." Uh or and if the the parent tries to say what the child should or shouldn't be doing, then the child just sneaks the food. And so what do we do when we get ourselves in a situation where a child is sneaking or is just outright defiantly saying, "I'm going to go and get some chips and there's nothing you can do about it."

Well, I'm thinking two things. Is the parent being considerate without cater- catering or are they being uh way too austere with their meal and snack planning? Does the child have to be defiant in order to get food that they enjoy eating? Uh so, that's the first the first uh consideration is making seeing it from the child's point of view in terms of the food that the parent is choosing. The um uh second consideration is parental authority. I mean, there's uh what would you do if a child was uh misbehaving in other ways? If you told them no, you can't go to the neighbor's house and they go anyway, what would you do?

Um, and, you know, that there would be some punishment for that child or there would be some loss of privileges for that child if he defied you in that way. And the same thing applies to food. It's, uh, just because it's food doesn't mean that you relax on parental authority. And so Okay. Okay. And And then I actually needs to I I really question that has been kind of sort of bothering me for a while and it's the the distinction between boundaries and limits.

Um, and and we in our community sort of think of boundaries as something that I'm not willing to do. So, I'm not willing to cater to you by cooking another meal. Um, I'm not willing to get you another snack now. And I'm completely on board with setting boundaries. And but it seems that there's another aspect of this which is trying to change somebody else's behavior. So, you may not have another snack now even if you're going to get it yourself. Or you may not have this certain food at snack time. Um, and I I completely see the fit with boundaries and SDO R. But if we're trying to follow our child's cues around hunger and support them in following their own cues around hunger, why are we setting limits on, I guess firstly what they eat and secondly when they eat it. And I think a lot of parents think of this around grazing through the day.

Mhm. Well, I have to tell you I don't, uh, the what you're saying about boundaries and limits doesn't mean a lot to me. Uh, or you know, it does doesn't compute for me. I'm glad it computes for you. Um, but in terms of, uh, you know, that the division of responsibility in feeding is all about who does what. It's about control. Who's in control of what? And uh, if you can call that a boundary or a limit, but it's who's in control of what. So, the parent is in control of the what, when, and where. And the reason you're in control of the when is that you want that that it's important for uh eating confidence is important for people to arrive at eating times on time and hungry, so they have the opportunity to take an interest in the food that's there. And so, the the when then is important.

Now, um I I guess I can't say, uh so what am I missing here, you know, that um the it's the it's in the parents' purview to say when the child shall be allowed to eat. And when you, um you know, if you predicate the

way you feed your child on structure, that means that the child's rhythms of hunger rhythms are going to match the family mealtime. You don't just feed the child when hunger strikes.

You have you establish the structure, and so the child's hunger rhythms come to match that. And and and this is important. I mean, it's all about sociability. If you have everybody eating willy-nilly whenever they feel like it, then you're not going to be able to have a family meal because everybody's going to be off eating on their own. So, yeah, it has to do with uh with uh um sociability as well as uh providing for the child's nutritional needs.

Okay. So, it's holding those two things together. And then, I guess the the other aspect of it is around um whether grazing is actually harmful. And in in Child of Mine, you actually um cite a study uh it was based in New Guinea, though, and was talking about uh children who had poorly developing poor outcomes of development when they were snacking throughout the day grazing rather than when they were eating structured meals and I'm just wondering is it harmful to a child to a child's health? You know those I'm glad you talked about those New Guinea children because it was strangest thing and I I read a recent study that says they're still doing it and the thing is that parents prevent parents instead of all over the island prepare meals, you know, they have rather they're cooking over an open fire. It takes a long time to get a meal ready. When they get a meal ready, the parents sit down and eat and nobody goes and finds the children and in the meantime the children are roaming the island and if they happen to show up at somebody's campfire when it when their food is ready, then they get to eat and if they don't, they don't. And so it seems to me that has more it's more about population management than it is about nutrition because those kids don't do very well and and they die.

But the grazing and the way that we do it is that you know in terms of nutritional quality nutritional adequacy that kids don't graze for a vegetables. They graze for candy and chips and you know the high sugar high fat easy to like foods. So in order to see to it that they get the food they need, you need to manage grazing and also in terms of how much they eat. You know, sometimes and it's so so variable that sometimes a child who grazes eats too much and gets too fat.

Like the little boy that I told you about. Other times they eat too little and you know, grow poorly. And other times they just grow fine. It seems like children vary so much in terms of their growth potential and their ability to regulate food intake across a variety of ways of managing feeding. And so really the best bet is to um go with the what, when, and where. Have structured feeding where you bring kids to the food and a positive setting and give them an opportunity to get their nutritional needs met. Okay. I I am hearing a little more nuance from you though. It's it's um it seems as though some children are are fine with the with grazing and maybe they're even grazing on vegetables. Some children are. But most probably aren't. Some children are grazing on vegetables.

Um so I I get the the idea of if we want to be more sure, we should Right. with the model. If everything's okay, you know, the child is is following their curves and they are eating a balanced diet, is is grazing inherently harmful? Well, no. No. Why Why does it matter to you? I mean that you don't know which child you have, so wouldn't you optimize your feeding for all these three different kinds of children that I was talking about?

Okay. So it's really not about grazing being good or harmful about really whether it works. Um and you know, and I think it comes back to parents eating competence that if some you know, some parents just want to graze all day long. They don't want to have structure in the way they feed themselves and uh and for those parents it's very hard to introduce structure in feeding. Uh but I nonetheless it's it's important um because it's really hard to feed children if you don't have structure.

Mhm. Um And yeah. Um For one thing, there there's without structure, there's absolutely no sociability around eating. Everybody's on their own doing things their own way. Mhm. Okay. And so, if there was one sort of nugget of wisdom that you would love to impart to parents, what what would it be? I'm I'm thinking of two or three that that come to my mind, but I'm curious as to what comes to your mind. Oh.

Relax. That I I That was what my first thing. That was my first guess. Yeah. And enjoy your own food. Mhm. Um you know, in today's world, there's so much pressure on worrying about food, doing it just right, eating the right food, avoiding the wrong food. And it just is is just way too painful, and it's ineffective, because we end up with all these agendas about how we want ourselves to eat, how we want our kids to eat.

Whereas if we can relax and have look forward to a good meal, and go to the table hungry, and eat until we feel satisfied, and let our kids do the same, you know, chances are we're we're going to come out pretty well. Mhm. Uh because we'll be raising children to feel good about eating, eat a variety of food, enjoy eating a variety of food, eat as much as they want, and take seriously feeding themselves, having it not just be an after the fact offhand, oh, oh, I forgot to eat kind of thing, but um, you know, do a good job of feeding themselves.

Um, yeah. And, you know, in today's world, we're raising kids to uh, worry about good nutrition, to to uh, try not to eat so much, uh, try not to eat the food we like, or try not to eat too much for fear we're going to get fat. We're raising kids to worry about food, um, to be ashamed of their eating. Um, it's really not a good basis for nutritional health, um, for uh, main maintenance of appropriate for uh, consistent body weight.

It's uh, it's a choice, really, which which way you're going to have it. Are you going to be a nutritionista, or you going to enjoy your food? Enjoy your food, people. Thank you so much, Ellen. I'm so grateful that you could take time out of what I know is an incredibly busy schedule to speak with us. Oh, you're quite welcome. It's been fun, Jen. And so, listeners can find all of the references for today's episode, along with links to Ellen's website and her books at your