

**Transcript: Feeding the Body and Mind: Nurturing Healthy Eating Habits
From the Start
Featuring Daniel Kessler, M.D.**

Q: Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am really pleased to welcome Dr. Dan Kessler who joins us today to talk about young children and feeding, umm, more specifically, how to get your young child off to a healthy start. Dan is a board certified developmental and behavioral pediatrician and clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Arizona College of Medicine. Umm, but he will soon be joining Southwest Human Development as the medical director of their newly established child development center, umm, where he will continue his work with young children who have feeding difficulties. Uh, Dr. Kessler has actually worked in this area of feeding difficulties in young children for over 30 years. So, we are really pleased that you are taking the time to talk to us today, Dan—Dan. Thanks so much.

A: Oh, it's my pleasure.

Q: Umm, we're gonna be talking a lot more about the feeding relationship than about, you know, what foods you should give your baby, I guess what I'm saying is that feeding is about a lot more than just what your child is gonna eat or not eat, and, umm—

A: Right. I agree completely.

Q: So, let—let's talk a little bit about, umm, the kind of nature of the interaction between parent and child during mealtimes, during feeding. And—and—and just help us understand a little bit about why this—the relationship matters so much in terms of nurturing your baby.

A: Perfect. Umm, well, just as you said, Annie, umm, feeding is a lot more than—how much your child eats, or even what a child eats. It's really all about an opportunity for a child, uh, to join in on the social fabric of a family. Mealtimes can be hectic, but for many families it's also a time

when they all come together at least at times to share, umm, in their joy of being with one another, share their experiences, and—and really participate, umm, as a family.

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Q: Right, I think it would be fun for you to describe, you know, what in your mind would the sort of ideal feeding environment—you know, interaction.

A: Sure. If you could imagine, you know, an infant in the middle of the night waking, crying, not quite sure why they're crying, they haven't—haven't obviously necessarily made the connection between I'm hungry, I need to eat, and the infant is fussing, and uncomfortable, and—and the parent, you know, picks the infant up and cuddles them and is talking softly and responsively, umm, you know, and—and the message is I'm here for you. And then—then the parent, you know, either offers a bottle, or if they're, umm, a nursing mom the breast, and—and it ends that discomfort and the feeling of hunger. And the message there around feeding is that—that people are in my life who will meet my needs by making me warm, by providing love and nourishment, and that's such an important message for this new growing, developing infant. And—and hopefully, you know, those same messages in—in various ways are—are consistently being, umm, expressed through the day.

Q: Right. Right.

Q: Let's say, a—a, you know, twelve-month-old?

A: so, the—the toddler is at the family table. They're observing, uh, and maybe, you know, in their own way participating in the conversation. Umm, every, uh, participant is taking a turn maybe sharing something about their day while they're enjoying their food, they're thanking somebody for preparing the food. They're hopefully enjoying the food. Umm, and—and it's also an opportunity to maybe comment on—on—on the physical properties of the food. You know, you can talk about the color of the food, the texture of the food, the smell of the food. And the child is using his or her skills to do that as well. And—and typically by twelve months of age, uh, the child is certainly capable of picking up small pieces of food, umm, with their fingers, and—and getting it into their mouth. Umm, if they don't like it they might make a comment or a noise, and—and that's something to be aware of. Or a parent can say, "Wow, that's so good. We haven't seen you eat a carrot before," and—and—you know, and—and describe the carrot. The carrot is orange. And if it's a cooked carrot it's soft and it's—it's—it's munchy, umm, or—or—or what it smells like. Or if it's slices of carrot, then they're round. So, there are lots of things,—the physical properties, the color, the sensation of feeding that can be used as a teachable moment for that child.

- Q: Right. Right. So, let's—let's talk about at what age or at what stage you should begin to—to set the stage for—you know, for a very—for healthy interactions around feeding. Umm, I mean, I'm—I'm assuming that we're talking about at the point in which you're introducing solid food, or does it really start earlier?
- A: Oh, well, feeding—concerns about feeding our babies start as soon as we start feeding them. You know, the—the first decision that parents often make are will I be nursing my infant, will I be breastfeeding them, or will I be bottle feeding them, and—you know, and it's clear there are many advantages to breastfeeding, but breastfeeding is not the only way to raise a healthy child. Umm, not every parent can breastfeed for a variety of reasons, umm, and they need to feel comfortable with that decision as well. So, it's as soon as we feed our infants that that relationship becomes so important. It should be a pleasant experience for both parent and child. So, it starts right away.
- Q: So, I'm assuming that a lot of those feelings that surround that very early nursing or bottle feeding experience, that it's important to pay attention to them.
- A: Absolutely. You know, all feelings are mirrors, uh, into our souls, and, umm, they should never be ignored. Our feelings around feeding affect how we approach our child during the feeding, and can color that experience both for us and the child. So, you know, feeling good about your choice, umm, speaking with people, making sure that, umm, you're providing the best possible, umm, experience for your child, whether it's nursing, or it's formula feeding, umm, that's what's important. The feeding experience is to the benefit of both parties, uh, no matter what a parent chooses. So, you know, parents should feel comfortable with those choices, and—and should know from the start that they can meet their child's every need, umm, even if they choose not to breastfeed.
- Q: Right. Let's talk a little bit about when a child is a bit older, umm, when there is a—a certain amount of interaction going on, and maybe even a little bit of like refusing, or spitting the food out. What—what are some of the things you tell parents in terms of, you know, when they first start introducing solid foods and they're, again, interacting with their child in a different way?
- A: Sure. I like to think of feeding, umm, as encouraging interaction, encouraging connection. Even for the infant it's a—it's a time of warmth and togetherness, and they—and they get very important first lessons from those interactions. Umm, so, it—it's important as an infant to

establish that. As—as kids get older and they're beginning to start on foods other than the breast, or other than a bottle, then it becomes a little bit more challenging. And—and I like to talk to parents about two concepts. One, is, uh, what Ellyn Satter, who is a registered dietician, and therapist, author, all-around feeding guru likes to talk about as division of responsibility. The parent is responsible for what the child eats, meaning what is offered to the child, when the child eats, the schedule around feeding, and where the child is eating. Is the child eating, umm, in a high chair, at a table along with the parent who's also eating a meal, or what I prefer not to recommend, uh, with a tray in front of the TV. That complete ignores the social aspects of feeding. The opportunity for a child to see, uh, what a—what, uh, an adult is doing around feeding, how they are enjoying their foods, what types of food they're enjoying. So, I—I really discourage putting the child in front of the boob tube with a meal. The parent decides the what, the when, and the where of the meal. The child decides how much to eat. So, the decision what to eat and even if they're going to eat is totally up to the child. There is absolutely no call for this clean-your-plate mentality.

Q: Right.

A: If the child decides that I'm gonna skip this meal, parents should not be desperately worried, that they really need to think in a larger time period. So, if you look at what a child is eating over several meals, you could have an excellent meal, and then a couple of so-so meals, and then a meal when a child is really not interested in eating anything, and then another really good meal.

Q: Yeah. Actually you're reminding me—I remember coming across this really bizarre list, and it said, you know, two raisins, half a grape, four Cheerios, bite of toast, and I thought, "What the heck is this?" and then I remembered that some relative sort of in passing said, "My gosh, you know, he looks really scrawny," and I realized, you know, that I had become obsessed with cataloguing everything he ate. But of course it was a very useful thing to do, because when I looked at the end of the day and added up everything he had actually put in his mouth, even though he may have grazed his way through the day and not eaten a lot at a single sitting, I was—I was much relieved. So, that's a very, very important point to kind of put—you know, take the big picture, not worry over a single meal, or certainly a single serving of something.

A: And—and you raise a very good question. You know, when should a parent be concerned? You know if—if a relative says, "Boy, Billy looks thin," umm, is that the time for you to begin, you know, preparing super calorie meals for your child? And it probably isn't. And—and, you know, parents need to, again, take the larger perspective. Umm, and part of that

comes from their, you know, visits with their primary care provider, and—and the monitoring of a child's, you know, growth. But—but also of their health in general, and of their development. If they are happy, developing well, doing the kinds of things that kids do, and growing within the range of what should be expected for a child, and—and for that family—maybe everyone in that family is on the thin side and that's probably the better side of the growth chart to be these days. We have much more problems with individuals who are—are too heavy for their age and their size. So, you need to know when to worry and when not to worry.

Q: Yeah, certainly checking with your, as you say, health care provider is a—a really important starting point, particularly if you're worried. But I want to go back now to something you were talking about, which was, you know, this idea that's a child's responsibility to decide how much to eat, which certainly sounds like following your child's lead is really important.

A: Yes. You really can't make them eat, just as you can't make them sleep, and you can't really make them do anything.

Q: Right.

A: They are completely self-contained individuals. Obviously they can't survive by themselves.. But—but they have the abilities to do amazing things. And—and that's the other, uh, concept that I—I like to share with parents is that kids should be given a responsibility around feeding based on their developing abilities. And so, uh, you follow your child's skills, umm, and then you increase the expectations about their participation in—in the feeding experience as they get older. You're—you're not going to expect a newborn baby to lift a spoon and feed themselves. But as kids develop that ability, umm, they are provided, uh, increasing responsibilities. And in part that's also how we decide to begin, umm, using, umm, foods other than the breast or the bottle, is as kids are capable of sitting unsupported, can move their head front and back and side to side, uh, can use their expressions to tell us that they're pleased or that they're not pleased, or that they're enjoying their food or not enjoying their food, they can use their hands to—umm, I always think of this as a—as a good sign when—when a parent approaches a child with a spoon full of food and that child can either turn away, or push that spoon aside.

Q: Right. Right.

A: That's—that's a—a basic important communication that we need to notice, and acknowledge, and respect. And then when, umm, the child may be

introduced to a new food at that meal—toddlers are typically not going to try a new food easily.

Q: Right.

A: There are certain—who might eat anything that are presented to them. But it's characteristic for toddlers to be afraid of a new food or a new experience. But if they've had the opportunity to observe that food on someone else's plate—sometimes it's easier for a toddler to take a food off of someone else's than have it put on their plate. Umm, and if they've seen other family members enjoy that food and comment on that food, umm, even if they're not interested in trying it the first time it's—it's made available. Toddlers often require multiple presentations or multiple opportunities to experience a new food. And I believe Ellyn Satter talks about, the rule of fifteen-- that a child may need as many as fifteen opportunities to experience or try a new food before they actually take it, enjoy it, and then add it to their repertoire of foods.

Q: Yeah, no that's so interesting because I think that so many parents decide after one bite of something, which the baby doesn't like it, "Oh my child hates spinach, or hates green vegetables, or my child won't eat fish" or you know, I think bearing in mind that you may have to introduce them a number of times, up to 15, is very important.

A: Yeah. Absolutely, and trying it again, and maybe trying it in a different way, or, uh, spicing it up, putting some butter on—on a vegetable, or—

Q: Right. Right.

A: Or cutting it in a different way just to make it interesting for the child-- makes the experience more enjoyable, and, umm, over all a more pleasant experience for everybody.

Q: Right. So, let's—let's say that's the happy experience. But what would be a sort of a less happy way, or one that you feel is really gonna backfire?

A: Okay. Well, so, the—the child is now at their highchair, and parent puts, umm, a plate of some small pieces of food in front of them, and—and maybe now adds something that the child has never had before, umm, a possible response in the child is to take that little piece of food and drop it on the floor. And the parent is upset, and concerned, and now takes the piece and puts it in front of the child's mouth. And—and the child, again, is old enough to know that he can keep his or her mouth closed. Umm,

- and that begins to become a battle. Probably about one in ten, uh, parents of toddlers will admit to forcing a child to eat. If the child is not eating, that makes the parent feel even more stressed. And so they will try to force the child to eat it by opening the child's mouth, or putting the spoon into a child's mouth, or even bribe the child, you know?
- Q: Right. You can have your cookie. Right. Exactly. We've all been there. Right?
- A: Yes. Absolutely.
- Q: And three—three more peas, you can have your chocolate chip cookie.
- A: Umm, if you want the child to be able to self-regulate, umm, and they are remarkably capable of self-regulating, when, offered a selection of healthy, nutritious food without coaching, without bribing, without forcing, uh, over a period of days and weeks, a child can, umm, self-regulate, and take in all that they need for healthy growth and development.
- Q: Right. Right. No. That's—it's actually really fascinating. I want to just talk briefly about, you know, getting stuck, "You know, my child will only eat, umm, you know, noodles with butter—I mean, that's all he wants. And—you know, and I—I just think he's gonna starve to death, or he's gonna, you know, just not get what he needs."
- A: A parent who might be overly concerned about their child's growth, or their weight, or—uh, will be turned into a short-order cook, and, you know, begin making three or four meals at a time, which is really unsustainable, and really teaches the child I think the wrong lesson.
- : I think parents need to encourage kids to, umm, have what the family is having. If they're not hungry, umm, for that particular thing, maybe a parent can offer them, you know, one alternative, you know, their—their rescue food, you know, what they're always going to eat at a given meal. But—but they should begin making note of that if kids are decreasing the kinds of—of foods that they're eating, and—and really limiting it to two or three foods only, that may be a cause for some concern, or—or looking for some help. Umm, and there have been a number of suggestions made on how to get kids out of these food jags.
- Q: Right.
- A: Umm, and—and there are many actually very interesting ways of doing it by taking, uh, a favorite food and changing some aspect of it. You know, if

it's a peanut butter sandwich they can cut the sandwich using a cookie cutter and put it into a different shape, or, uh, they can take macaroni and cheese and use green food coloring to—to color it just to get the kid out of that box of eating the same food. .

Q: Right. Right.

A: Umm, and that's often very helpful in—in getting kids out of that rigidity that sometimes, uh, happens around meals.

Q: Again, bring it back to the parents also and how we respond to this, one of my favorite stories from identical twins who were separated at birth and brought up in different homes. And the mother was interviewed. And when she was asked about her daughter's eating habits she said, "Oh, it's just a disaster. I give her everything and she just won't eat anything unless I put cinnamon on it." And then the other mother—she said, "Oh,. Everything's fine." They said, "Really? She eats everything?" She said, "Yes. She eats anything I give her. Of course I have to put cinnamon on it." And, you know, to me this is a really wonderful story about how much our behavior contributes.

If you are very locked into making sure your child only eats things a certain way, then it can really turn into a very unpleasant, and as you say, in the long term not what you want your child to associate mealtime with.

A: And—and that's the parent's role. I mean, we—we communicate during mealtimes, and we—we bring a lot of our personality to it. And if we're happy and enjoying our food and—and being flexible and not getting upset about little things, then our child will experience that, and hopefully incorporate similar attitudes around feeding, and—and non-feeding activities as well.

Q: Right. Right. Well, since mealtime was probably the most important time of the day in my family when I was growing up, I have to say I—I've loved talking to you about this. Umm, I think, you know, you're sending a really important message about, umm, so much about how if we empower our kids and follow their lead and respect what they bring to this dance around food, that it—it can be a really—really wonderful way of nurturing a relationship; not just, umm, their—you know, their health.

- A: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I—I think of feeding as—as one of life’s great experiences, and great pleasures. And if we look at it as a social opportunity, it really is a wonderful way of in—inviting that child in as a full member of the family, participating in activities of the family, you know, enjoying one another’s company, and—and feeling both the love of our family, and the nurturance of good healthy food.
- Q: Great. Great. Well, Dan, thank you so much. This was so interesting and a very—and a different way of looking at, umm, feeding, and a very important one. And, umm, certainly one that’s very consistent with what Zero to Three is all about in terms of helping foster children’s emotional growth even around something that we think of very much as a physical need, which is food. So, thank you very much for all your wisdom, and I—I hope you have really nice lunch today.
- A: Thank you very much.