***Patrick:***

Now our children's food guru Belinda Smith is back this week after an extended break, a hiatus. Good morning Belinda.

***Belinda:***

Good morning Patrick. I have to say firstly two things. You always get me with a 1980s tune to start with, that's my era. But thank you for those kind words, it's lovely to be back.

***Patrick:***

Yes, well... What has been keeping your time? I'm interested to hear about Making Friends with FoodTM, this project.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, look, I've been, as many listeners will know, my business, The Root Cause, supports schools and helps children, families and teachers make friends with food. So I've been on the road quite a bit at schools over the last couple of weeks, but last week I had the absolute honour of presenting at the Easter Show at the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation brunch. They have nominated the Root Cause as their business of choice, supporting this year specifically to take Making Friends with FoodTM to 16 schools in Narrabri, Wee Waw and Moree.

So I got the opportunity to talk to 170 incredible people about... what we do and how we're looking at improving the health of the region.

***Patrick:***

So can you give us a bit of a quick little snapshot of what's involved in Making Friends with FoodTM and what will the kids get out of it at the schools?

***Belinda:***

Yeah, definitely. Well, Making Friends with FoodTM is a fun and innovative food literacy program and it's not really just for the children. We do, we have fun experiments and workshops for the children but we also support the parents and the teachers. The aim is to get everybody on the same page about thinking how making friends with a wide variety of food can help us be better learners, can help us protect our planet. So it's just I guess an education program that touches all of those spaces because our children, they're our future leaders to start off with and we do know that their health markers aren't that great as a generation, 44% of today's children have at least one chronic health condition.

And so our goal is to help children connect how incredible their bodies are and about how food can support their body, their mind, their learning and also the planet. But equally also support their parents because, you know, I've been doing this work for 10 plus years now. There's so many things that our parents are up against when it comes to feeding our families. Most of us are now working full time. We've got cost of living is increasing. There's mortgage stress if we're fortunate enough to have a mortgage and then otherwise there's rent stress. There's just a lot on our plate. Making Friends with FoodTM is about how do we help simplify feeding the family. for parents so that they actually feel great about it because there's a lot of heaviness in parents at the moment about when it comes to feeding their families. And then with the teachers it's really looking at, okay, well, what is it that we do in the school environment that can help encourage children to eat more of the foods that are better friends for their body, like more vegetable food.

***Patrick:***

Now just before we go to your topic this week, Belinda, I will ask about Making Friends with FoodTM. What was it like to actually have to pitch it to the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation? Did you feel like a bit of a Dragon's Den/Shark Tank moment? Were you on edge?

***Belinda:***

I was nervous to say the least. I mean, towards the end of last year we were approached by the foundation who had heard about our work that we were doing and we had to put together a little bit of a pitch for them to say, yes, you're definitely the business we would like support and a cause that we would like to support in 2024. But standing up in front of a room of 170 people that, you know, and all of their eyes are on you, yes it was a little bit daunting but equally it's one of those things that, you know, I do stand for children's health and sometimes you have to get out of your own head and into the hearts of other people really to make a difference.

For years we've been doing one, you know, going into individual schools, but this is about building capacity in a region because our health is shaped by our environment, so our school, our home, our supermarkets, our sports clubs. And so our real goal by going into this region is to help 16 schools start to really focus on how food can be, you know, can really change what goes on in a community. And so yeah, it was fantastic. It was an awesome opportunity to raise funds to support these schools, but it was also an opportunity to put forward an idea of when we have a whole community of people focusing on the same thing, that we suspect that we can actually improve the health of the whole region.

***Patrick:***

Absolutely.

And Belinda, now we go to... your topic this week and the language that we use about food is making some waves at the moment. I've said in my intro that it's national peanut butter and jelly day in the United States and on the old South Australian CWA recipe calendar of 1970 it's curried onion crisps day. Now are these bad foods, good foods, junk? Not really the words to use these days.

***Belinda:***

You know, looking at the language that we use around food. So if we turn back the clock, you know, probably to the 80s, there was a lot of, you know, fast food. For instance, McDonald's chicken nuggets hit the market in 1983. So that gives you a bit of an idea that back those days, there wasn't, you know, the proliferation of fast food and packaged foods that exist today. And so, lot of parents and my you know my mum especially I mean she was definitely in that generation of parents where it was actually quite expensive to eat out to take the kids to McDonald's to you know to buy a packet to chips and so she would always home make her food and then if we ever did have those food she'd say well we don't have this very often because it's junk food or you know you cake from the supermarket, a treat or something. And that is very much the language that many parents have grown up with and it's still language that lingers on today.

Unfortunately, a lot of the food that is eaten today is what people would have called junk food many years ago but it's just food for this generation of children and it brings when we attach our own labels of what we grew up with, it's very confusing for them. And not only that, there's also, you know, a lot of people carry shame around these words that get attached to food. So what we're trying to do and, you know, I'm not just talking about The Root Cause and Making Friends with FoodTM, but there's a lot of organisations now that are really actually trying to neutralise food and just say let's focus on how incredible our bodies are and how we feel and really tune in and listen to how we're feeling when we eat our food. Let's not make it all about, you know, whether a food is a certain label of what we grew up with.

And it's had quite a big shift because they've now started to also look at changing the Australian curriculum so that the food and well-being curriculum connection specifically says at schools you can't use these words anymore. So it's been quite a big shift and even to the point now where if you look at the history there's been a lot of focus particularly around the female body form you know like going back to years ago, many years ago full body figure to then like twiggy skin, skinny kind of figure to athletic and you know like. just been this constant focus on what we look like rather than how incredible our bodies are for what they do.

And so when you combine the linkages of all of this focus, and it's in everybody's faces these days with social media as well, all these focuses on body image rather than the performance of our body, it becomes very muddy. So we need to tune in and recognise how food is making us feel rather than giving it a label, so to speak.

***Patrick:***

Yeah, when it comes to words like good and bad, I mean I guess that you talk about the health factor and the physical factor but the psychological factor as well. One is a person is not bad for simply eating a certain food and one is not good for simply eating another and this could, having those sort of associations probably would increase your stress and promoting overall health and nutrition.

***Belinda:***

No, what we eat, it's about what we see, it's language is so powerful. Like I often say education programs that our words are our wand, what they see and hear us saying is actually really important. And so if, you know, you're saying to them, you know, that, that a junk food or that bad food, and yet you're giving it to them, like, what's your child feeling on the receiving end of that?

Are they associating something? But then also, what's it saying to us about ourselves? Like, because then we start to have this guilt about, oh, we've just given them a bad food, So yeah, it's about let's put aside everything that we've grown up with and just really start to focus on the, how incredible our bodies are and that we do perform better. You know, like we say to children, you can run, you can jump, you can sleep, all of these incredible things that we do. Let's focus on those things rather than what we look like.

***Patrick:***

And the term guilt-free, I'm eating this guilt-free, well everything should be eaten without guilt unless you probably stole the loaf of bread that you're eating, I think. The term guilt-free is a bit of a, you probably should stamp that out as well because ultimately, I mean food can be energy, it can be nourishing, but it can be satisfaction, comfort, joy, there's a lot of different words.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, exactly. And that's why we're trying to do these kinds of things now. to move away from what we've all grown up with and there's a little, let's be honest here, we've all probably got some level of baggage around food and quite often we bring that to the dinner table with our own families without even recognising it through the words that we say, through the foods that we offer and it's going to take a lot for us to change that. But unless we bring it to awareness then we don't recognize it and that thing that you said about guilt, you know like eating it guilt-free, well 100% we shouldn't feel guilty for eating anything but it's something that we have to consciously change because it's kind of embedded in what we've grown up with and now we've got that opportunity to say okay well we're the parenting generation that's not going to pass that on to our children but it requires real conscious thought about it.

***Patrick:***

And you may mention of like parents not passing on to the children, you said also the curriculum as well in educating our kids when it comes to that in the schools.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, definitely. I mean, particularly for our high schools, there has been a bit of focus in their HPE, you know, their health and physical education curriculum. where they've measured BMI and things like that. So there's been a focus on the white side of things. So that's now being removed from the curriculum, but also across all schools, whether it be primary or high school, it's now written in to avoid using the language of good, bad, junk, treat, so that we can just talk about it. Okay, that's a carrot or that's ice cream or that's cake. You know, like it's not a label, we're just actually calling it what it is.

***Patrick:***

And I guess also, yeah, terms like junk and empty calories, there really is no need for those. Just some foods are more nutrient rich than others but all food does have some sort of nutritional value. It's just some don't have as much as others.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, look, I mean food in general provides us with energy and our bodies need energy. Our bodies all need fat. many of us also grew up in the area where fat was kind of demonized, but now it's generally recognized that food is an energy source and we require energy for everything that we do and we also require a certain degree of fat for everything that our body does as well. And so getting into that space of recognizing that all food can provide that, but some are I guess better friends. From the perspective that they will provide you with more nourishment.

And that's why we say tune in and listen to how your body feels because if we really start to pay attention to that we will notice that when we say eat a carrot with peanut butter, have to say peanut butter because it's National Peanut Butter and Jelly

Day, right? That when you eat a carrot with peanut butter you will feel very different, when you're eating it and 40 minutes to an hour later than if you sat down and ate a bag of potato chips. So for instance you might notice that when you eat the potato chips you get that salty, crunchy, like fatty taste and you eat it really quick because that's what they're designed to do but 40 minutes to an hour later you're ravenous so you're hungry again. Whereas when you eat the carrot with the peanut butter and you get all of the fibre from the carrot you get the great fats and the protein from the peanut butter. that sure it might not be the salty fatty that you get from the chips, it's still delicious and an hour later you're still satiated like you don't feel like you need to go and eat something else. And that's what we need to get people to really start to tune in and listen to how are they feeling when they eat different kinds of food.

***Patrick:***

Speaking of tuning in and listening, Belinda Smith, thank you for your time on the program this morning. A great insight into the language we use when we use our food, and it's great to have you back on the program.

***Belinda:***

Thanks so much, Patrick. Have a great day, everyone.

***Patrick:***

You as well. Belinda Smith from The Root Cause there. Yes, good, bad, clean eating, guilt-free, junk, all those different labels and words we've used of the past, maybe a thing of the past.