***Patrick:***

Did you know that 44% of Aussie kids are living with one or more chronic lifelong conditions? And the US predicts that 80% will be by 2025. It's quite alarming, isn't it?

Well Belinda Smith from The Root Course has spoken to thousands upon thousands of parents and teachers about their concerns. She joins the program now.

Good morning, Belinda.

***Belinda:***

Good morning, Patrick. How are you today?

***Patrick:***

I'm going very, very well. This topic though, it would be close to many hearts for many of those who do have children with a chronic condition that they will have to live with their whole lives.

***Belinda:***

I think it's certainly a conversation. It's a difficult conversation and I really want to acknowledge ABC for going there because the research that's coming out, it's almost every fortnight, every month, there's more and more research connecting our food landscape to these chronic conditions, not just for children, but also for adults.

But I think the most alarming thing for us as parents and for listeners is that this generation of children are the future leaders of our country. And what they've now identified is that 60 to 90 percent of what we're seeing is that this generation of children are consuming foods that they've now, like researchers, really started to link to these chronic conditions. And we're talking about things that, you know, diabetes type to anxiety and depression, heart disease, cancer, dementia.

So this conversation is really difficult because as a parent myself, I've spent... you know, a lot of years, the last 13 years, changing the landscape of what my children are eating because of my family's health issues. And it's a very, very difficult scenario to be in.

I was listening to Dr. Chris van Tulleken, who's the author of a book called “***Ultra-Processd People***”, why do we eat stuff that isn't food and why can't we stop? What he's actually doing here is pointing out that this is outside a parent’s control. It's being driven by industry and we're doing our best at grappling with it all. And he pointed out, you know, like that in a way the research is so prolific at the moment that we need to do something about it.

But as individuals, it's very, very difficult because of the environment. So your supermarkets, when you go in there, what's in front of our kids, what's being marketed to us, the colours of the packets.

***Patrick:***

Processed bad food, yeah.

***Belinda:***

Well I mean, Patrick, I don't mean to pull you up on air here, I'm going to. At The Root Cause we don't label food because for our generation of children, this is food.

***Patrick:***

Right.

***Belinda:***

But when you and I were growing up, and I mean I'm 55 for listeners who are out there, you know, the food that our children are eating every single day, my mum used to call party or junk food, and we only ever had them at birthday parties or at Christmas, like I guess special times of year. And we grew up with those labels, but for our generation of children, it's just what they're eating. So we can't continue to slap labels onto the foods and think that it's actually going to make a difference in what we need to do.

***Patrick:***

Right.

***Belinda:***

It's a very interesting situation and I have to say my position on this has changed dramatically over the years because when I first started doing this with my own family, I still had that lens of party and junk food and all of that in my head because that's what I've grown up with. You know, one of the things parents will know is that the more we tell our kids, no, you can't have it, the more they want it, of course. And today they will find it anywhere. Their best friends at school will have some or whatever.

So we need to learn to navigate this landscape. And I just want to quote something that Dr. Chris van Tulleken says, so that all the parents out there and the grandparents, the people who are listening, to understand that wherever you're at is totally perfect and there's no judgment. And this is what he actually said. “He says “demonizing food that is the only affordable food” he’s actually uncomfortable doing it. But however, he thinks it's really important that we call out that this food isn't really nourishment and the food companies are designing food specifically, you know, to what's going to be the cheapest. that allows people to eat more without feeling hungry so they come back for more. They're their prime objective.

And so what he's saying is us parents, you know, we need to be aware that this is happening and to be angry about it because this food isn't being made for the health of any of us. It's being made for profit. And so I want everybody out there not if when you're listening to this today and you start to think, oh gosh, I feed my children this or I do that, please don't feel guilty or shame by that because we're all doing the best that we can right at this very point of time.

But you know, there's so much research at the moment between, you know, Deakin University here in Australia is leading the charge in the field of nutritional psychiatry and they're showing a very clear link between the quality of the food that we're consuming and all sorts of mental disorders and everybody who watches the news knows that, you know, anxiety, depression, these kinds of mental disorders are actually escalating and particularly in our youth.

Now I'm not saying that food is the only factor here. We all know that there's many, it’s multifaceted. It’s related to where we live, it's related to our financial ability to afford different foods, it's related to technology, you know, there's so many different things but the one thing that I guess I like to say to people is think of what something that's simple that you might be able to swap and that does tend to be what we eat.

So I've got like I guess three little tips that I would like at the end of the show to leave listeners with because I think that whilst we know that this is now an industry-driven problem and a lot of the science is now actually saying we can no longer say that it's a personal responsibility, kind of like years ago with what happened with smoking, right, where they finally, they used to say, you know, it's up to the person to stop not realizing that, you know, well... I mean, industry knew that it was difficult for a person to stop. And then government policy had to step in. All the science is now pointing to the fact that, you know, it's not a person's problem of willpower because these foods are engineered to get us to want to eat a certain way.

***Patrick:***

Absolutely. It's 21 minutes past 10. I'm speaking with Belinda Smith from The Root Cause. talk about your three tips at the end of our chat. Well why don't we go into them now?

***Belinda:***

Yeah, that's a great call.

I mean **the very first one is just being aware**. In Dr. Chris's book, he talks about how difficult it is to remove a lot of these foods from the way we eat because they have become such a big part of it. And he said just, you know, still allowing yourself to eat it, but being conscious of turning over the packet so you can look at the ingredients and go, oh, okay, I'm eating the sodium ribonucleotide. What is that?

You know, and so that's step one is just really being aware. And it's one of the skills that we teach in our programs with schools. You know, we teach the teachers, the parents and the students. when, you know, to turn the packet over and just look at the ingredients, to ignore all the stuff that's on the front, which talks about, you know, 25% less sugar or lunch box friendly. Ignore all those labels and turn it around. So that's the very first thing he says is don't worry about trying to change anything right at the moment. Focus on becoming aware so that when you're eating it, you look at it and question it.

The **second one is**, again, it's something that we really, teach children in our Making Friends with Food program at school, which is about **learning to tune in and listen to our body**, like how we are actually feeling, because the research is clear that food can make us feel many different ways. We can feel happy, sad, sleepy, grumpy, we can feel hungry, anxiety, like anxious, all of those things and food can play a role in that. listening to what their body is actually telling them, how are they actually feeling. And that's a really important skill for us, us parents too, because we live a very busy lifestyle. And quite often, you know, we will eat our lunch at our desk so that we can make sure we're out the door on time to pick up the kids. And we just roll from one thing to the other and we are not recognizing that perhaps the lunch we’ve packed is enough to go right through that afternoon when we know that the kids get a bit crazy. So that's step two, tune in and listen to your body.

And then t**he third one is to add in rather than focusing on restricting**. So it's really easy and I made this mistake myself many years ago, 13 years ago. Ripped everything out of my pantry. Anything that had a number in it that I didn't know what it was, I just got rid of it. it's become very, very difficult because those foods were kind of entrenched in the way that my family ate. So that was, I guess, a really silly thing in hindsight, you only learn from these things, was that I was trying a restriction method of changing what we're eating rather than going, okay, well, this is how we eat. How can we do a little bit better? Like... What can we add in? So it's about what can we add in rather than restrict, you know.

So one of the things that the research actually shows us is that the more fruits and vegetables, you know, plant foods that we eat, foods grown in nature, the more of those we eat, the more they support the beneficial bacteria in our gut and allow us to flourish, whereas the more foods that we eat from a factory. It actually pushes out the bacteria in our gut that crave fruit and vegetables, which is why it's so difficult to get kids to go from, you know, eating lots of potato chips and with flavors and things and then giving them a piece of broccoli. Like, I mean, the taste is very different.

So think about what you already do and what else you might be able to add in. So afternoon tea, kids always come home, I'm starving mom. You know, rather than just giving them like a bag of potato chips for instance, put out a bit of cheese and crackers and some carrot sticks along with a little bit of potato chips with what they're used to. So you're adding in, and you're still giving them what they're used to, but you're adding in more of the good stuff. And I mean, I shouldn't say good stuff because you know, that's a label, but it's more about adding in the food that we know is more nutritious and is, you know, more likely to support their learning and their health. And in doing that, we're just making gradual changes.

And the beautiful thing about what the research, the latest science is showing is that our bodies are amazing, that with some simple changes, we can start to change, in a matter of weeks, the composition of our gut bacteria which affect our mood, our focus, our learning, our sleep. So any little thing that you can do to add something else in to boost nutrition is definitely going to help.

***Patrick:***

So Belinda, you talk about yeah, gut health and how the body does feel. So on the psychological aspect to those who might suffer from anxiety or depression, what could they make the change in their diet to help improve those conditions on the psychological aspect as well? Is that just eating a little bit cleaner and just the body will in turn feel better about itself and psychologically it will have an effect?

***Belinda:***

Well that's a very great question and I have to be honest with our listeners and yourself to say I'm not actually qualified to give people advice on this kind of stuff. It is nutrition is a very personalized thing but the one thing that the research is showing across a and there are so many different diets out there, that the one thing that does make a difference to our gut health is simply eating more fiber because our gut bacteria needs that to improve digestion and to, you know, I guess produce more beneficial bacteria. So adding in anything that has more fiber, which tends to be our plant-based foods, you know, our foods grown in nature, vegetables, fruits. legumes, beans, all of those kinds of things, your grains. So that's one of the things that is pretty consistent across all the research that fiber is something that will make a difference not to anyone specific health condition but generally for the whole population we could do better at eating more fiber.

***Patrick:***

Fantastic. Well Belinda, thank you for popping by the program as always. Always a wealth of knowledge. looking for more information they can hop onto The Root Cause website I presume?

***Belinda:***

Yes definitely we've got loads of information there and if anyone is interested in learning more about how we support whole schools we are running an information session this afternoon at four o'clock so you could send an email to support@therootcause.com.au and we can get details to how you can either participate live at four o'clock Australian Eastern Daylight Time or get a replay sent to you.

***Patrick:***

Fantastic. Well, looking forward to speaking to you next week as well, Belinda.

***Belinda:***

Great. Thanks Patrick. Thank you everyone.

***Patrick:***

Always a pleasure. Belinda Smith from The Root Cause there. For more information, you can always pop on to therootcause.com.au to learn more about Belinda and even download some recipes.

And just remember, if anyone you know needs help or yourself, 13 11 14 is the number for Lifeline.