***Patrick:***

A Federal Senate committee is holding a hearing in Orange today as part of its inquiry into the market power and food pricing practices of the major supermarkets. And for our regular guest, Belinda Smith, founder of the Root Cause, one of the biggest things that saddens her is that many parents have expressed they were stressed, frustrated and drained by feeding their family.

Belinda, good morning to you.

***Belinda:***

Good morning Patrick, how are you today?

***Patrick:***

I'm going very, very well but as the cost of living crisis is still prominent in all of our lives, what is it like for you at the moment? What are you hearing?

***Belinda:***

Well look, I think we talk at The Root Cause. We work in schools and we help create lifelong nourishing relationships with food or friendships with food and we speak to a lot of children, parents and teachers. So we're at that grassroots level. I guess real stories about what's going on for people I guess you would say at the cold face. So for parents we are hearing that cost of living is a big thing but what's stressing them out the most is just the level of fussy eating that exists for their children and this tells a couple of things that brings a lot of angst to the dinner time setting.

Many of the mums that we talk to, they're awake at three o'clock in the morning concerned about a whole range of things and one of them is with their child being so fussy, what does it mean to their long-term health. So there's just lots of I guess concerns around how they deal with these kids that are so fussy.

So today I wanted to try to share with parents something to help them. bring a bit of peace for themselves because when we're in a stress state it's very difficult for us to be there for ourselves let alone our families. So I always like to say that nutrition starts before eating which means that there's the whole fussy eating part but there's a lot of stuff that goes on before our kids actually start to eat. Does that make sense?

***Patrick:***

Absolutely. Well it must be very close to your heart given how food is so fundamental to how we feel, sleep, our energy levels, our overall well-being to hear that there is so much frustration and anger and sadness amongst parents. I'm sure this is right at the crux of what you want to do and why you're speaking with me today.

***Belinda:***

100%. I mean the comment that got to me recently and it really made me quite sad was where a mum said she felt like she was failing her kid because she couldn't get them to eat what she wanted them to eat. So I want to firstly start by saying to people wherever you're at is totally perfect and wherever your children are at is totally perfect. To recognize that we live in a society where our health and well-being is shaped by our environment. So obviously the cost of food is a big factor. But also just recognizing that we are in an environment where a lot of the food that we have access to is designed in, it's designed, it's manufactured and marketed in such a way to make our children really want those flavours, you know, the sugar, the salts, the fats that come in those foods. And the science is now actually showing that the more of those foods that we eat, it starts to change the composition of the bacteria in our gut, not just our children, this applies to adults as well. And our gut bacteria starts to want to have more of these foods that pushes away the bacteria in our gut that desire vegetables and fruits and our foods grown in nature.  
  
 This isn't your fault. This is the society and the food culture that we live in. So that was the very first thing, just to let you know that for those people out there who are feeling some level of guilt around any of this, please put down that whipping stick because this is a lot bigger than what goes on in your own home, if that makes sense.

***Patrick:***

Absolutely. It sounds like what you're saying is kids can themselves develop cravings at such a young age that it can be hard to fight back against those cravings if these foods are in their system and like you said the gut health and the bacteria can change that kids may see the healthier options and it can be hard for them to want to eat that when they want something else.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, 100%. There was a documentary last year by Dr. Chris Van Tulleken who is the author  
 of a book. called Ultra-Processed People and he conducted a scientific experiment where they tracked what happened to his brainwaves and his neurotransmitters in his brain as he started to eat a bigger variety of ultra-processed foods. So they're foods that are made in a factory that tend to have six or more ingredients, things that you and I could never have, listeners could never have in their pantry because they are designed and created in a factory. And what it actually showed was that his brain started to rewire and crave those flavors and so it is a lot of this is actually outside of you know anything that we're doing it's the way the food is being designed. So just even being aware of that is you know, I think can give us a little bit of peace.

But I really wanted to focus on, I guess, taking a step back from all of that and thinking before we even contemplate what we can do to change our kids who are fussy eaters, what can we do to bring ourselves a level of peace.

So I've got five little things. I always love to do things in little steps of five that I would like to share with our listeners today and I think hopefully after they hear these, even if they just choose to do one of these things, they may find a little bit more peace around what's going on at the moment.

***Patrick:***

Well Belinda Smith from the Root Cause, take it away, what's the advice, what are the five?

***Belinda:***

Well the first one is, I always call it letting go. So write a list of the things that you say about your children and about dinner time. It could be my child's a fussy eater and I always say, let's just say where my child's a fussy eater, how does that feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Do you feel heavy? Do you feel sad? Do you feel it in your stomach? Do you feel it in  
your heart? Then find another way of thinking about that. So I encourage people to think  
about rather than putting our kids inside a box. that says they're a fussy eater and that's  
who they are, what about if we just opened the lid of that box a little bit and said, my child  
has very strong preferences at the moment and we're working on expanding that. Right. How does that feel in your body? And it feels more freeing like if everyone even tried saying  
that at home, you know, it feels more freeing to yourself and it also becomes more freeing  
to your child because look the reality is... just where they are today doesn't mean that's  
always going to be where they are. And if we think back to our own selves, you know, when we were growing up, we had our own likes and dislikes to food. You know, I didn't like brussel sprouts or peas.

***Patrick:***

I still hate tomatoes.

***Belinda:***

See, there you go. So we often forget that it's okay to not like some food, but also that our tastes change. So I encourage people to... let it go like write down what are the things you know that are they're saying you know like dinner times the battle every night and then find another way of you know freeing themselves from the heaviness of that statement. So that's the first one, letting it go.

The second one is I just really encourage people to do a little mantra before I know this sounds a little bit woo but you know before they start. dinner and before they sit down to dinner is just to remind themselves that they're doing a great job. So I've got a little magnet that we give out to all the parents who attend our session and it's a mealtime mantra and it goes like this.

***Just for now I let go, I did my best, I'm at peace.***

So it's just about recognising that you turn up every single day rain, hail or shine, you're doing your best. And that's all like we don't say to our kids like if they come home and they  
you know lost at sports you know the first thing we say is “Did you do your best?” Well if  
you did your best, that's okay but we don't give ourselves the same level of grace. We do turn up and we do our best every day and if our child chooses to eat or chooses not to eat that doesn't mean we haven't done our best. So meal time mantra. I'm at peace.

The third one is what I call the feeling behind the doing and that is we can, we've got to turn  
up and feed our kids, that's just the reality of family life. So we can either go into it  
carrying like, oh tonight's going to be such a struggle or I don't know why I do this because  
they're not going to eat it anyway and we can go into it with all that heaviness or we can  
flick on the music, trainer in the wave. Walking on Sunshine always does it for me. It's on the  
music and prepare dinner while you're listening to your favorite music or while you've got a  
podcast or something on something that lifts you up and makes you feel better. So the feeling behind the doing can totally change and the wonderful thing about this is the feeling behind the doing, if you're having fun while you're doing it, that energy radiates around the house. And instantly the kids think, oh, you know, mum or dad is in a good mood today or whatever. So they come to the table feeling a little bit better about it as well.

Now the fourth one is a little bit tricky. It's a feeding methodology called the Division of Responsibility and it goes something like this.

Our job as the parent is or the caregiver is to decide what food we're going to make available, where we're going to make available, like is it at the dinner table, is it on a picnic rug, are we going to go for down to the beach and what time we're going to make it available. That's our job.

Then it's our children's job to choose how much of what we've put on offer, are they going to eat? So it really becomes like their job to decide, oh, I've got it, out of everything that's put out there, what am I going to eat and how much of it am I going to eat?

Now this is a difficult one for parents to get because sometimes we get in our head and we think, unless I tell them what they're going to eat, they're going to go hungry or they won't eat it.

But sometimes in our desire get our children to eat, we add a lot of pressure and that makes our children a little bit more anxious about eating and when they're anxious about eating,  
it becomes you know sometimes eating becomes uncomfortable for them. So it's about releasing the pressure for both of you. Knowing what our job is to provide the food, where they're going to have it and at what time and then just giving our children the space. to choose from what we provide, what they're going to eat and how much that they're going to eat. And look, the reality is only our children know, you know, how much they need to eat in terms of their hunger cues. We can't possibly know really just how hungry they are. Just like no one else knows how hungry you are. So that kind of makes sense.

And the last one, I always like to say food is a fun experiment. So go into... anything around feeding our kids with the perspective that it's a fun experiment. Sometimes experiments work, sometimes they don't. And a lot of the time it has nothing to do with the actual food. So we can start having fun around food way before dinner time. We could use the power of screens. We could get our children involved in researching like say what would you like, where does that grow, how many different varieties there are, you know like make it a little bit of a fun activity or we could print off some pictures off Google and get them to colour it in or you know growing things from scraps, you know like there's lots of reels that go around you know the socials of people growing things on their kitchen bench from scraps, you know like celery or lettuce. children become little, I call them mad food scientists, it's just a bit of fun for the kids, where they conduct these little experiments and grow the food themselves.

So there's lots of different ways that we can explore and have fun with food without even getting our children to eat it. And the more they are exposed to a wide variety of food without feeling pressure around it, the more likely it is that they will become at ease around food when it comes to them serving it up.

***Patrick:***

It's quite remarkable that you've managed to corral that into five points there Belinda. You do amaze me sometimes when you come into this program a lot often.

For more information though for those parents listening in who want to find out more as well as these five tips you have given off this morning, what other resources are available especially as we head towards Easter which I can imagine would be a bit of a busy period and a stressful period as well.

***Belinda:***

Yeah, definitely. Look, we've got at The Root Cause, we stand for children's health. So we have loads of free resources, recipes, you know, articles, tips, tools and templates on our website which is therootcause.com.au.

But one of the things that we know that works really well is when our children are learning things at the same time as their friends and their peers because they kind of learn off each other. Our program, Making Friends with Food, is a great way where we support whole school communities, all of the children, all of the families and all of the teachers and the staff at the school to you know come along and have fun with food really and to make friends with food.

***Patrick:***

Belinda Smith, always a pleasure to have you on the program, looking forward to speaking with you next week. Thank you for the advice as always.

***Belinda:***

My pleasure, take care everyone. Thank you.