Welcome to conversations about care, a podcast for pediatric clinical providers.

Hi, this is Sandy Hassing, and I’m the medical director for the Institute for Healthy Childhood Weight at The American Academy of Pediatrics. I recently sat down with my friend, Sally Samson, director of Chop-Chop Family. We wanted to discuss the importance of cooking and how pediatricians can support families with early nutrition choices through education. Stay tuned to hear our conversation.

Sandy: I’d like to welcome everyone today to our podcast with my good friend, Sally Sampson who is the brains behind the magazine many of us have in our clinics called, Chop-Chop, and got me interested in teaching cooking and talking about cooking with my children and families. Welcome Sally to our podcast.

Sally: Thank you for having me!

Sandy: You know, cooking is such an engaging subject, but it’s one that we don’t often talk about with our patients and family, and of course with the rising concern about obesity, about food insecurity, about the effects of COVID, it’s becoming clear that cooking is becoming essential for families to negotiate the nutritional atmosphere they find themselves in. I wanted to start out by just asking you, Sally, how did you get interested in cooking?

Sally: I always liked to cook as a child so that’s just something that I did, but like a lot of children, I made cookies, brownies, and that sort of thing. When I was 14 a friend of mine said to me, “You know, I’m going to become a vegetarian. Do you want to be come a vegetarian?” I was like, “Yeah, sure.” I mean, people weren’t vegetarians then. It was very unusual. I thought fine, so I stopped eating meat and for this audience I will say that my mother dragged me to the pediatrician and she said, “What do I do?” The pediatrician said to her, “It’s just a phase, don’t worry.” I can literally remember saying, “Just watch me! It’s not a phase!” Two weeks later my friend said to me, “I don’t want to be a vegetarian anymore.” I said, “Okay, I won’t be vegetarian.” Then that night we had chicken for dinner and I was like, “No!” I really sort of in those two weeks became a vegetarian and stayed that way for 12 years. What happened was my mother said to me, in the nicest, most loving way, “You better learn how to cook because I’m not doing anything special for you. I’m making dinner. So, I learned how to cook. I really just … I can remember just experimenting all the time. You know, there really weren’t even vegetarian cookbooks then. I just started cooking and I loved it, and I still love it!

Sandy: So, how did you get from self-preservation vegetarian cooking to the magazine called Chop-Chop?

Sally: So, I have a daughter with a chronic illness. She has … again, this group will understand, she has chronic recurrent idiopathic pancreatitis, and when she was very little her gastroenterologist said she should be on a five percent fat diet and so I started cooking that way. In my research ended up learning a lot about obesity because at that time, the way I was cooking was all low fat and that’s what people were talking about then. At some point … very quickly, the gastroenterologist said it five percent fat is not the right thing for her, so we launched Chop-Chop. As you all know we launched it with the vetting of the AAP and in many, many nutrition’s offices.

Sandy: So, what’s been your biggest challenged and or surprise in your work with Chop-Chop and getting this information into the hands of the pediatricians, children, and families?

Sally: I think when I started people really didn’t get it. It was sort of like cooking and kids, nahhh, I don’t get that. Cooking and obesity, nahhh, I don’t get that. Over this time, particularly as you said in the introduction, now people really see the connection. So, I guess to be honest I was really surprised in the beginning that people didn’t get it. Yet I will say pediatricians were still willing to try it because it was also really such a great way for pediatricians to connect to their patients, for parents to connect to their children, to bring in as we do math, science, cultural literacy, financial literacy. Cooking is like … we look at everything through the lens of cooking, but I think people were kind of willing to give us a chance because even if you didn’t want to actually cook, you could still learn things in the magazine or you could still learn things by cooking.

Sandy: So, Sally, this makes me really think how relational cooking is and I remember that I used to leave copies of Chop-Chop magazine on my exam tables and the kids would come in and look through them while they were waiting. I remember a little girl who was about 9 and she leafed through the magazine and saw a recipe that she got attracted to. She turned to her mom and I had just walked in and she said, “Mom, I really want to make this with you.” I thought the mother looked like you had just struck her with lightening,” because I think never before had her kid said I want to make something with you let alone a healthy something. So, I just realized the power of just the engagement in cooking as a relational event between family members and the excitement that kids have when they really learn to do a new skill. It was just such a happy moment to see that happen.

Sally: Go ahead, sorry.

Sandy: No, go ahead Sally.

Sally: We’ve actually heard a lot of stories about kids who ask their parents to make things that the parents were really surprised at, but what a lot of parents told us was that the kids were sort of forcing them to be good role models. So, if your kid says to you, “Let’s roast carrots,” you sort of have to say yes. It’s an inexpensive thing, it’s easy to make, and the kids seem to be, for the most part, driving the changes and bringing their parents along.

Sandy: Yes, and I think that we experience the same thing. We ran a cooking class for adolescents who were at risk for diabetes and they were cooking and several things happened. One is we had a big family meal at the end of the course and the parents had a lot of new food there that they had never tried and were very willing to do it because their adolescents were so proud of their efforts. Also, the adolescents would be cooking food and then bringing it home. The parents were just enthralled and said, “I have something really positive to talk to my son or daughter about. It was just really such a good experience for them. So, I wonder as pediatricians how you would help us begin the conversation about cooking with our families.

Sally: What we recommend is that pediatricians pick a recipe, say in an issue, or pick a recipe from their own lives or from the internet, but pick a recipe that is relatively simple and talk to the child about it. Say, “Last night I made my own salad dressing. All you do is you throw these three ingredients in a jar and you shake it up.” So, what we’ve found is that if the pediatrician has actually made something themselves and can share their own personal experience it kind of gets the kid excited about doing it. Then it’s this back to … it’s a real interaction, it’s a real connection with the child. So, that’s … it could be literally anything. It could be … I sliced up an avocado and put it on toast this morning. So that …

Sandy: I think drawing from our own experience is so powerful because I think that kind of is a bond with the kids. We’re excited and then they get excited and the parent gets excited watching the kid get excited.

Sally: Exactly!

Sandy: We really have come to appreciate that cooking is an essential health skill and we’ve been thinking a lot at the Academy and I know pediatricians have been thinking about how we get the very young children on the right track with eating. Can you share with us some of the things that you’ve done in terms of this early nutritional literacy for kids?

Sally: Well, with your support and the support of the AAP we just launched a kitchen activity deck for 2+. It’s called “Eatable Alphabet.” It’s an A through Z, really simple … I mean, I almost want to put recipes in quotes for kids to do with the adults in their life. For instance, A is for avocado. So, it shows a picture of an avocado. So, you could really just use it for that. Like here’s an A, there’s avocado. Then on the back for each letter there is a visual sort of equation so you don’t have to speak English, you don’t have to be a reader to see what it is. So, in the case of this it’s an avocado plus a piece of toast and it equals avocado toast. Then on all the recipes, or all the pages, there is sensory things. So, there’s looking at something, touching, moving. So, it’s roll like an egg. We basically came up with anything that would engage the kid. It could … there’s somebody who has had the Eatable Alphabet for about three months and she tells me about what her daughter is doing. She tells me she hasn’t even gone into the kitchen yet. Her daughter is using it … I think she’s three and she’s using it to learn the alphabet, she’s rolling around, she’s jumping, and they’re talking through it. That’s really what we were trying to do. You don’t have to even get in the kitchen yet. That, obviously we want you in the kitchen, but we want … there’s also count. So, you know there are so many different ways to start the engagement. No age is too young.

Sandy: You know, and we know parents are really, for lack of a better word, ‘hungry’ for ideas for activities with their kids, especially now during COVID when everybody has been at home, and anxious to know how to interact with their kids in a positive way. I just got off the phone talking with something about the pervasiveness of screen time. It’s so great to have activities that are really relational, hands on activities that families and kids can share. I also think that the idea of engaging kids with healthy eating does help the family focus more on healthy eating. I think parents know the importance of it but aren’t always sure of how to get from where they are to a healthier way of eating. So, if we’re talking to our families, and maybe we’ve shared a recipe with families, how would you go on with that conversation if mom just goes or looks a little 07:44:46, like how do I get from where I am to where I really want to go, which is a healthier eating plan? How would you …

Sally: I think, you know, I’m not a pediatrician, but I think that I would probably ask … I would probably start with vegetables and find a vegetable … or maybe I would start with fruit, but something, a fruit or vegetable that is healthy. So, maybe it’s an apple and maybe this is a family that just eats apples. They don’t eat any other fruit. I might talk to them about how you can slice it and put peanut butter on it, or some sort of nut butter. I would really encourage people to go very slowly and not to make the kid feel bad, or the parent feel bad if they don’t do it right. I would just … we say take really small bites. Change is slow, and in this case, I think that you don’t want to have people go backwards. One thing that I will say is kids are much easier to change their habits than adults. A lot of the time it’s the parent who’s like, “Ick! I don’t want to eat this!” So, they’re not going to give it to their child. We did … so, for Eatable Alphabet we F is for Fish. We did tuna, anchovies, and sardines. We opened them all up, the parents are in the room … so we did classes, sorry! We did Eatable Alphabet classes. So, the parents are in the room, there’s like a bunch of three- to five-year-olds that are in our class and we bring out this fish. The mothers, or the women, are like backing off like there’s poison being put into the air. The kids, nothing! They ate everything. We had three-year-olds

 eating anchovies with no issue. It really … the kids didn’t say anything about, “Isn’t it stinky?” Nothing. We were a little surprised. Not shocked, but a little surprised. They just were like, “Oh, here’s something new and interesting.” We see that all the time. It’s parents and adults who are like, “Oh no, I’m not going to eat this!” I think that if you can get them to participate in it, then they’re more interested in trying something. So, I think we squeeze lemon on them, we might have put mustard on some of them. I think because the kids were engaged in the activity it was more compelling to eat the food.

Sandy: Well Sally, you’re making me smile because we often and frequently talk about adults as being role models for children, but in this case, I think the children were role modeling for the adult.

Sally: Absolutely!

Sandy: I think there is something … something as a pediatrician that I just love that the children were fearlessly approaching the anchovies while the adults were backing away. I think it speaks also to children just liking to get physically engaged with their food. We all know that and we spend time actually, I think sometimes distancing children from their food. When they learn to go from finger foods to utensils, a lot of food comes pre-prepared and prepackaged and it seems to me we spend a lot of time distancing ourselves and our kids from this physical sensory experience of food. I think kids really love that sensory experience.

Sally: They do and, in this case, they also took enormous pride at the fact that they were eating it and all the grown ups were backing off. So, I think they felt this kind of like, “WOW! I’m kind of outgrown uping the grown ups!”

Sandy: So, so true! As we know it’s really important to start with our youngest children and we know that the school aged children are very happy to get in the kitchen often with supervision and be of help at meals. It’s a great engagement tool. I know you don’t always talk about adolescents, but do you have any help for us for ideas about the adolescents and their families and how we engage with them around the food?

Sally: Well, I was 14 when I said to the pediatrician, “Just watch me!” But I think that one thing I would probably do is encourage kids to make a meal a week. Just sort of say, “Okay, you pick a day of the week,” and let them pick, “You pick a day!” The kid says Wednesday, and say, “You can go online, you can look in these cookbooks, you can look in Chop-Chop. You pick something and I’ll help you if you need the help, but that’s your responsibility.” I think one of the things we say to parents is “Teach your kids to cook and they’ll make you dinner.” It’s hard to start when they are an adolescent, but I think that’s pretty powerful that you’re sort of really contributing to the family, you have a responsibility! They may not make stuff you like, but you can still say, “Here are the parameters! You can’t order pizza.” I think that I would do something like that. If it’s a kid that’s really reluctant to do that, I would start maybe with snacks. One thing that I did with my kids was when they came home from school, I had cut up vegetables and let’s say humus, and cut up melon on the table. They were so hungry when they would come home from school that they would eat whatever I put there. We’ve seen this with a lot of families who start doing things like that. If you sort of put it out there when they’re really hungry, they’ll eat it maybe even a little unconsciously at first.

Sandy: Such a great idea, both of those things. I often think of the cycle that we’re in as pediatricians because our adolescents become young adults, and as young adults we know that young adults have some of the worst eating habits of any age group, and those young adults become parents.

Sally: Right!

Sandy: So, the opportunity to engage with food and cooking at every age is so important. Maybe they haven’t done that as a young child or a school aged child, but it’s never too late with your adolescents to talk about this and to get them engaged with their cooking and their food. They will the parents sometime.

Sally: I look at my own children who are in their 20s. They don’t live at home and they call me for recipes. It’s different, but I think that they see kind of the power in being able to feed themselves. You know, their friends are ordering take out all the time and they’re not cooking fancy stuff. It’s just that they can feed themselves and that’s very powerful.

Sandy: And very empowering! I go back to the teaching adolescents cooking and the parents were very, almost overwhelmed that the adolescents would then cook for the family and that was an enormously powerful thing!

Sally: Exactly!

Sandy: For both the adolescent and the family to see. So, as we move forward, we’re all coming out of COVID with an increase concern about obesity and food insecurity. There’s been some economic down turns. It seems to me cooking is going to be more important than ever. In terms of just helping families talk about cooking in a way … I liked what you said, “It’s not why aren’t you cooking, but where are you and how do you start.” Do you have any thoughts about … I was always struck with how dinner was a problematic meal for many families. They’re busy, they’re stressed, and when the kids come back from school now, they’re going to be coming in hungry. Any thoughts about how to help families make dinner less of a project?

Sally: You know, I think something really simple. Is that what you mean? Do you mean what to cook?

Sandy: Yes! I had mother’s kind of tearing up about dinners. They would either be cooking 22:36 and then the kids didn’t want to eat or they’d be defaulting because they thought they needed a hot meal and then they didn’t have time so they ordered out. They were just sort of going round and round. What’s the best thing to do in the constraints that they had?

Sally: I think one thing is to really try to prep on a weekend. Maybe it’s if you’re making a soup … let’s say you want to have soup for dinner. You try to make it on Sunday as long as you don’t work on Sunday. You make it or you marinade chicken. Things like turkey burgers are so much healthier than beef. It’s the exact same thing. A turkey burger takes 10 minutes. One thing that I’m a really big component of is making a simple thing and then putting options on the table so if you do have a kid who is considered a “picky” eater, they can have the plain thing, but then you have mustard on the table, you have salsa on the table. The kids can participate in that way. So, the parent makes the simple thing and then the kid kind of jazzes it up, or not, according to what they want to do. Even if it’s … sometimes you have to have a lot of ingredients. For some people that’s … it could be lettuce, tomatoes. I think it’s also you don’t have to get it perfect. You can eat eggs for dinner. You can put plain pasta and let kids adjust or put things in it. I mean, right now, I’m making chili in the background for a friend. She doesn’t want it spicy, so I use a recipe from Chop-Chop. It’s really not spicy. So, I will give it to her and what’s left over I’ll add spice to for me. She can put lime juice on hers while I’ll put on lots of different things. So, I think it’s kind of trying to mix and match a little. Don’t sweat it too much! Find a recipe you like and make it over and over. I think most people make … in most peoples’ repertoire they’re probably making 10 to 12 different things anyways. They’re not making 40. So, I would just pick simple stuff!

Sandy: What I love, love, love about what you said is “Make it simple and easy,” and let the family members participate in garnishing that food and adding to that food so that you really made a participatory event out of the meal. I just love that!

Sally: I think it really helps and you know it … people have different taste and I think if a child feels like they have some agency it’s going to help. Or an adult for that matter.

Sandy: Right, and actually it’s kind of a step sort of a [inaudible 26:00] cooking. You’re in a participatory mode when you do that.

Sally: Right!

Sandy: So, I just wanted to thank you so much for being willing to come on and talk about cooking. I think that we’re all becoming aware of not only the importance of cooking, but how it can bring a family together, contribute to literacy and numeracy, relationship building, and just the centrality again of cooking in all our families. I just would like to thank you Sally for all the work you’re doing about helping us all learn to cook, get better at cooking, bring cooking back into that part of the family. So, thank you very much.

Sally: Thank you for having me. So, keep on cooking!

Thank you for listening to my conversation with Sally about nutrition education for families and strategies to support healthy food exploration through cooking. Please remember to check out some of the relevant resources including The Eatable Alphabet Kitchen Activity Cards, Quick Bites, and the Finger Foods Poster, Complimentary Food Introduction and Graphics, The Picky Eating video, and our Early Feeding Module. I’d also like to direct your attention to the AAP Policy on Nutrition in the First 1,000 Days. Thanks again for listening.

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