



**The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast
Episode 2 Transcription**

The Power of Family Mealtime: Barriers, Benefits and Strategies for Eating Together with Jill Castle, MS, RDN

Mary Purdy:

Welcome to The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast, where healthcare professionals and health minded consumers are provided with practical and helpful nutrition information on current and trending topics from subject matter experts. My name is Mary Purdy, and I'm an integrative eco-dietitian, nutritionist based in Seattle, Washington. And we are talking about family mealtime today. And I was thinking about this. I remember when I was a kid growing up in New York City actually, and we always had a family dinner together no matter what. I don't even remember not having it. My mom, my dad, my brother, we sat around the table, we talked about our day, no matter what it was, tuna casserole, chicken and vegetables. And it always felt like a real anchor to the day, whether it was a weekend or a weekday.

We are speaking with registered dietitian, Jill Castle, all about family mealtime. And in case you guys missed episode one, that was with Dr. Andrew Abraham. And we discussed his truly inspiring story as a cancer survivor and now as the CEO and founder of Orgain and got some really wonderful insights into his expertise as an integrative medicine physician on the topics of immunity and inflammation.

Our topic is the power of family mealtime, barriers, benefits, and strategies for eating together. And I've got to say this comes at a really great time because so many families have been eating more at home. And since the start of the pandemic, it's become a really important part of I think a lot of people's days.

So, we are excited to introduce a very special guest to share more on this topic. This is registered dietitian and one of the nation's premier childhood nutrition experts, and also a member of the Orgain nutrition advisory board, Jill Castle. So Jill is a sought after speaker and media contributor. And in addition to serving as an advisor for Orgain, she also serves on the board of advisors of Parents Magazine. Jill is the creator of TheNourishedChild.com, a parent nutrition education website, and is also the author of several books, including The Smart Moms Guide Series, Eat Like a Champion, and Try New Food, and is also the co-author of Fearless Feeding. And she just happens to have her own podcast, The Nourished Child. Jill, welcome. So great to meet you.

Jill Castle:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Mary Purdy:

And we just shared about your being an advisor for Orgain's newly established nutrition advisory board. And as dietitians, we really love to see that Orgain and companies like that have created a credible board of dietitians to support initiatives and support products. So what inspired you to join the board?

Jill Castle:



Well, first off, so impressed that they care enough to make sure there is credible advisors behind the product, so that really attracted me. And I love the story of Dr. Abraham's, I love the fact that they have products for children that are really conscientious about what goes in those products in terms of natural ingredients, even plant-based ingredients for families who might be pursuing a plant-based product. But families struggle feeding their children, and we need companies to be on board as ambassadors and helpers to parents to better nourish their children. And I feel that Orgain really does a good job of that.

Mary Purdy:

Agreed. Well, thanks for your input there. And today's topic is actually really interesting because it's all about family mealtime, and the impact that this has on children's eating habits, and also how that affects their nutritional intake all the way into adulthood, so I'm curious for you. What sparked your interest in child nutrition?

Jill Castle:

I'd have to say it goes back to my internship as a dietetic intern and doing my two-week rotation on the pediatric ward. And that basically, for listeners who might not know, as a registered dietitian, many of us do a one-year clinical internship, food service, it encapsulates a lot of different aspects of becoming a dietitian, and the clinical rotation is really working on the hospital floors with a variety of different patients. Many hospitals at the time that I was an intern have two week pediatric rotations, so you get to dive in with children of all ages, all kinds of medical conditions, and manage their nutrition. And I think for me, I've always been drawn to children. It's why I have four of my own. I babysat a lot when I was a younger adolescent.

But what really struck me in my pediatric rotation was that children are not unlike adults in that they experience nearly every medical condition that an adult might experience. They experience cancer. They experience heart conditions. They experience diabetes. They have all kinds of medical conditions like adults. Yet, the difference is they still have to grow. They still are developing their food preferences. They still have nutrient requirements so that they have those strong, healthy bones, and they've got smart brains when they grow up.

And so, for me, it was so fascinating to combine all this clinical management with nutrition and marry that with this pediatric population that is constantly changing. The nutritional needs for a baby are so different from those of a toddler, which are different from a child and of a teen. And so the challenge professional and personally, and then the joy of working with children who are so upfront and not manipulative, for the most part, they're really just pure and sweet. And you get a straight up answer. And you're really helping them form their attitudes, their beliefs, their habits. There's just so much potential in working with children, and so that's what attracted me.

Mary Purdy:

I think I can understand why you've written a number of books on this topic. Clearly, you've got a little passion in you around this.

Jill Castle:

I do. I do.



Mary Purdy:

And tell us more about The Nourished Child Podcast. If you love kids this much, you created an entire podcast. It'd be great to hear about maybe one of a memorable moment or episode in your podcast.

Jill Castle:

Yeah. What's so interesting over the course of my career, initially I was so driven to be helping children. And then at some juncture, probably a decade or so ago, I realized that the power was really in the parent. And so I kind of shifted how I thought about my impact with families. And The Nourished Child Podcast and really everything that I've been doing for the last decade or so has really shifted to focus on parents. And so, the podcast is all about making, feeding, and nourishing children easier. So that show airs every other week, so bimonthly for the most part. And I toggle between just solo shows, where I'm giving tips and tricks and practical solutions for parents to put into place in their own homes, or I'm interviewing experts on a variety of topics.

For example, I have a show coming out on the infant microbiome pretty soon. And I'm interviewing Julie Mennella tomorrow about flavor preference development. So many interesting things that are going on in child nutrition that parents might not hear about, and I'm trying to bring those topics to them through the podcast.

Mary Purdy:

Nice. Well, there is no shortage of topics, and I always love to hear about the microbiome, so I'll be checking that one out for sure. You mentioned the word nourished, and I want to understand, and our listeners probably want to understand. What does it actually mean for a child to be nourished? Is it the same as being healthy?

Jill Castle:

I guess you might liken it to being healthy, but when I think of nourished, I am thinking certainly physically nourished so that children grow and develop normally. But I'm also thinking about their social emotional development, their cognitive development. I often say on the show, "We are nourishing kids inside and out." I also want them to feel good about themselves. I want them to have confidence and have a good body image. So, the show and sort of what I like to get after in my line of work is nourishing them, all the organs on the inside, and but also their mental state, their emotional state when it comes to food and eating, as well as optimizing their growth and their overall development.

Mary Purdy:

It's such a nice holistic approach, really looking at that entire, all the different things that make up what a healthy child or nourished child could look like. And sounds like you've got just incredible resources as well. Yeah. I think a lot of parents also get confused. They get stressed out about what's good for their kids and their specific nutritional needs. And they're trying to figure out this and that. And I'm curious if you have a question that you hear a lot from parents in your practice.

Jill Castle:



I do. I have a couple of questions that I hear a lot. What's a healthy snack? And these are all food related questions. And I would love to have different questions from parents because I feel like there are a lot bigger things we could bite off and talk about. But what's a healthy snack? Or how do I get my child to eat X, Y, or Z? Those are probably the two most common questions. And what I will say about them is that it makes me recognize that's where parents are at mentally. That's where their mindset is at. It's all about the food. And I think again, going back to what I feel like I'm spending my career working on is broadening that conversation to include not just food, but to include: What's the feeding experience like? What is your child experiencing at the dinner table? And I think we'll talk a little bit about that as we move on.

But where is your child at developmentally? How is he feeling about himself? Where is he on the development curve? And how are you matching his development needs with food and eating? And so to me, there's a huge conversation when we talk about child nutrition. But where many parents are at is: How do I get my child to eat this? And what is the best food to feed my child?

Mary Purdy:

I really appreciate this idea of bringing in these other components of what it means to have a nourished child in there besides the specific foods. But before we dive into that idea of being around the table together as a family, I know that a lot of people are concerned about the whole picky eating thing, so we hear that term a lot. What do you feel like briefly are some of the most important points in understanding picky eating, and also managing it?

Jill Castle:

Yeah. There's a lot of things. I mean, I wrote a book on this topic, so there's genetics has an influence, how children were fed early in life and how they were exposed to different flavors throughout their childhood has an influence, how you feed a child who tends to be picky. Do you use a lot of pressure? Do you use rewards? Do you use restriction, punishment, threats? All of those things are counterproductive. Again, I mentioned: Where is your child developmentally? What's your personality? What's his personality like? Does he have a temperament that is I'm going to push back every time you tell me to do something? Or is he more an amenable child? I think for parents, what I try to tell them is the more you try to get your child to eat something, the less successful you're probably going to be.

There's a lot of less coercion and more cooperation is sort of the motto when it comes to picky eating and finding ways that you can connect with your child who might be picky about certain foods. But also, as a parent, understanding that every child's on a learning curve when it comes to foods, and some kids need more time on that learning curve than others. And you've got to work with the child that you have and set them up for success. Exposures, cooperation, giving them self-control, letting them be autonomous, all of those things, which are really that social emotional backbone to eating need to really be cultivated in parents. They need to have that understanding so they can be more successful.

Mary Purdy:

Cooperation, collaboration, instead of coercion, very nice. And speaking of challenges, well, the past year has been a big one. Right? But actually, there's been a lot of positives that we've seen come out of it as well. And that is for many people, more family time. I'll say not everybody loves the family time, but



for many people, they do love it. And that family time has actually I think strengthened a lot of relationships. And it's led to a lot of families feeling more close emotionally, and that may be a direct result of the simple act of just eating together.

My husband and I, we don't have kids, but the two of us do sit down for a meal almost every single night, and we really take that dedicated and intentional moment to think about our connection to our food. And that comes as expressing gratitude to everybody who brought that food from the seed to our plate, so the land, the growers, the harvesters, the people who transported it, the people who cooked it, which maybe was me and my husband, or somebody else. And so that really feels like a way to strengthen our own relationship to each other, to our meal, and to the food system overall. So, share with us a little bit about the benefits of this family mealtime.

Jill Castle:

So, there's actually been quite a few studies on family meal times, and how frequently we should be having them, who we should be having them with. Overall, most of the research again tells us what you just mentioned, is that we are strengthening communication, cohesiveness, and connectedness amongst families when we bring everyone together around the table. That is under the supposition that environment is a positive environment. Right? Because we can have family meals that can be very negative for children, and we don't want that. That's not going to necessarily produce those benefits that we see in the literature. Some of the other sort of nonsocial emotional benefits that we see are things like eating more fruits and vegetables. Kids who participate in family meals are eating more fruits and vegetables. They tend to have healthier eating patterns. We also have research that tells us they get better grades at school. They are taking fewer risks if they're teenagers. They are less inclined to have mental health issues. Again, a lot of the research around family meals suggests that not necessarily the more the better, but I think we can glean that the more the better is a good thing. What we know about frequency is about three times a week seems to be sort of that magical frequency that shows these types of benefits. Five times a week, there's literature that shows five times a week as well.

I think where parents oftentimes get a little confused is that they think that meal has to be dinnertime, and it doesn't have to be dinnertime. It can be breakfast. It can be lunch. It could actually be sitting down with your children and having snack time with them. It's really the community that happens around food I think that is the most important part. And if you can have that happy, positive vibe at the meal table several times a week, don't get hung up on gourmet dinners, it doesn't have to be that way. But it's really just coming together with your children. And a lot of things that happen around the table that are not quantified in the research is that your children learn their manners.

If they don't sit at the table with an adult and see an adult eating and using their utensils and putting the napkin in their lap, and pausing, and that social interaction of sharing food and sharing conversation, children don't get that learning unless they are sitting at a table with an adult. And so there are other benefits that we don't even quantify in the research so much.

Mary Purdy:

Well, it sounds like it has just exponential benefits that go way beyond just getting an extra green bean into a kid's mouth. And you mentioned three times a week, five times a week, eating together. But what



about the actual mealtime? How long should parents want their kids to be sitting, or expect their kids to be sitting at a table? What would be optimal do you feel like?

Jill Castle:

Yeah. That's a good question. I usually say for an older child, somebody's who's in school, who can sit, 30 minutes is a reasonable expectation for older children. And for young children, preschool and younger, I usually say 20 minutes. The attention span is shorter. And I guess I would also qualify that statement with the fact that you've got to know your child, and some children, they just don't have the capacity to sit for 20 or 30 minutes, and so parents may be working on stretching out that timeframe over time. But yeah, having those reasonable expectations is important for parents because if you have a toddler sitting for 30 minutes or 40 minutes for a meal time, I guarantee it's not going to be a positive experience for that toddler. And so then parents need to really think about how their child is responding to sitting for long periods of time at the table.

Mary Purdy:

And that leads me to my next question too, which is: How can parents help to get their kids feeling more focused or less rushed at the mealtime? Since that seems to be an area where people can either just rush through a meal in five minutes, or have a really, really unfocused experience, what's your advice around that?

Jill Castle:

I think keeping the conversation going, coming to the table as an adult with some questions in your back pocket, some daily events, some standard sort of conversation starters that you can do with your children, and calling out your child's name. I know that sounds so simple but, "Hey, Marty. How was your school day today?" Really being very direct to children, that keeps them engaged and can keep them sitting at the table for a little bit longer. Ask questions, talk about what happened in their day. Ask, "Would you do this, or would you do that in this situation?" There's lots of things that you can ask and involve children with in terms of the conversation.

Again, it goes to know your child. If this is going to feel punitive to your child, then it might not work. A sticker chart for sitting at the table might work for a child. So understanding the child that you're living with is very helpful. But yes, for preschoolers and toddlers, that timer, it's a very black and white thing for them to experience. And if you think about toddlers and preschoolers, and even very young school aged children, they're very black and white thinkers, so whatever techniques you use to extend that time at the table, you want it to match their cognitive abilities and the things that drive them. So developmentally, a young child is very, it's right, or it's wrong, it's yes, or it's no. It's black or white. And so a timer is very concrete. Right? I've got two more minutes, and this thing's going off, and I'm out of here. Right? That's very easy for a toddler or a preschooler to understand.

An older child might be more motivated by a star chart, or a sticker chart, or something along that line. And then as children get even older, just setting the boundaries. You don't have to eat at this table while you're here. If you don't want to, you don't have to. But you need to be here with us. This is a family event. Treating it like an event I think is a key as well, not as a chore, not as a, I have to do this, this is such a drag. Parents feel that way, and I get it, believe me. I had all four of my kids home for the



pandemic for 11 months. Dinner got to be a drag. Making dinner got to be a drag. Right? But I think there's a mental mind shift that can happen. Just embracing that this is an event, this is a family event.

So, if you were going to a family wedding, you would get all gussied up. Everybody would take it seriously. Everybody would show up and be on their best behavior. Same thing for family dinner, just it's an event. This is something we do most days of the week. And we're all, this is the time we can all come together.

Mary Purdy:

Nice. And hopefully that's not with everybody on their cell phone, sitting there and eating.

Jill Castle:

Exactly. That's a boundary.

Mary Purdy:

That's a big boundary. That's for adults as well. We've got all these benefit of eating together. And we also want to make sure that kids are hungry enough to actually eat at those meal times, so they aren't overly distracted. And snacking trends are really on the rise, especially since kids have been home a lot more often. I had a dear friend of mine say that one of her kids basically is looking for things to do. And what's to do? Well, there's snacks in the kitchen. That's something to do. Right? So what do you say to parents who are struggling with setting limits around those snack requests that come throughout the day?

Jill Castle:

So, I often in my work teach diplomatic feeding. And diplomatic feeding is really based in setting up a structure, having boundaries, and guiding your child to make choices. So structure is really that timing and location of meals, so breakfast at 8:00, lunch at noon, dinner at 6:00. And it's routine, and it's an everyday occurrence. And it's not negotiable. It's not a question of whether it's happening. It does happen every day. That's your routine. That's your structure around food and around eating.

The boundaries are how you keep that structure in place. So the kitchen is closed is probably one of my favorite boundaries. My poor children learned that slogan very early in their lives and they knew early on that we would have breakfast and the kitchen was closed until the next time to eat. So that basically means nobody comes into the kitchen to help themselves in the pantry to help themselves in the refrigerator, that there's no eating going on during that closed period of time. And when we talk about sort of that structure of meals and snacks and the timing in between, the two and a half hours, to three or four hours in between meals and snacks, those are really physiological correct timings for most children.

So, it means that physiologically, they're not really getting hungry after having a meal for another two and a half to three hours. And so maintaining that sort of space in between eating sessions really helps children tune in better to their appetites and eat in a regulated manner. But in order to preserve those times and that space, we have to be strong with our boundaries. We have to have a system set up to encourage our children. Ask first before you help yourself to any food. You have to ask an adult. We



close the kitchen in between meals and snacks so that there's no roaming and foraging in the pantry and helping ourselves. So little boundaries like that really help children understand the system within the home. And when they understand the system, they operate better in it.

Mary Purdy:

Excellent. Well, this has been such a ... This has been a feast, a veritable feast of information, Jill, that I think parents and caretakers and folks who work with kids, and maybe the kids themselves if they're listening, are going to really, really, really enjoy putting into play and practice. So any final words about meal time, anything at all that you want to offer our listeners before we wrap up here?

Jill Castle:

I would just say that at the end of the day, now being a mom of four grown children, at the end of the day, I can tell you what my children remember are those family meals, the hilarious laughter we would have at the table, the serious conversations we would have, sometimes family sessions on we are resetting boundaries, or we're righting wrongs, we are apologizing for behavior. I mean, whatever family things would come up, from really fun to really serious, mostly happened at the table, and that's what my kids remember. And I know that children who grow up in families where family meals are part of the routine do look back on those meal times. And it's key to have those be pleasant meal times. They don't have to be a party every week, but they need to be pleasant and welcoming, and a warm, caring space for children to grow up in. So I would just encourage all the listeners to do a family meal tonight.

Mary Purdy:

You heard it here, folks. Family meals bring the family together. And hey, you might just solve a couple world problems around that dinner table. Thank you so much for your wonderful, thoughtful responses and time today, Jill. We've loved having you.

Jill Castle:

You're so welcome. I've loved being here.

Mary Purdy:

We look forward to having you join us for future episodes of The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast, sponsored by Orgain, where we'll interview more subject matter experts on a variety of health and nutrition focused topics. To stay up to date on the latest episodes of this podcast, be sure to subscribe on your favorite podcast platform. That's it for now. Thanks so much.