



Alexx Chats to Dr. Deirdre Ryan

A: Can you just let us know what drove you into the field of psychology and how you found yourself settling on the children's niche ?

D: I've always been fascinated by human behavior and what makes us tick and what makes us thrive in certain environments and maybe why we find certain things more challenging and really thinking about some of the biological factors as well as the environmental and social factors that lead us to function and behave in the way that we do but I think that the core of it, not to be too cliché but I've always had a passion for helping people and think particularly mental health carried not so much today but has carried with it quite a lot of stigma and it can be quite a taboo topic so I've been really motivated to make it more open to the masses and make people feel more comfortable about mental health.

A: Beautiful. And why kids? Why did that happen?

D: I always just loved kids, I've really vivid memories of what it was like to be a kid myself particularly being a teenager as well and all the really positive and wonderful things about that but also the pressures that came with being a child and it came with being a teenager, trying to fit in, really wanting my independence but also still needing parents to look to, to kind of guide me in where I should go in my life. I think in her is something that a seed was small within me very early in my career when I was looking more at the body image and older adults. Gradually then my research took me where I was looking at prevention of eating disorders in high schools. I had the opportunity to go into high schools and talk to teenagers about what crashes they were under particularly in regards to attitudes toward food and body image. It was just an interesting journey in just hearing what they had to say and I just wanted to keep going with that. So that kind of drove me to look more at the younger kids again, work in primary schools, at the younger levels seeing where those perceptions of self begin and then going even younger and working with parents and kind of seeing how they experience their own body image and how that might impact on the little kids.

A: So doing Thrive, we've been discussing obviously real food and developing a genuine love for it as a family, we've been talking about family meal time, the importance of getting kids in the kitchen cooking with us not just for the sweet cakes, but learning to make the old Bolognese on a Tuesday night and all of that stuff as well. Fussy eating has come into it and obviously body image as well, nutrient density, eating for a better immune function, all sorts of things and it's all part of the puzzle but obviously the mental health part is a huge part of the puzzle as well. And something we find that quite a few of us struggle with as we transition to eating real foods is you become the weird family. We are in a society where barbecue shapes are more normal than carrots and hummus. And the carrots and hummus are seen as the weird kid food. We're just really conscious as shoppers as we get to be for this beautiful thrive community to make sure that we empower families, to know how to kind of troubleshoot when some of these anxieties, or I feel different, or any of this kind of stuff arises, not just for the allergy, kids, or the sensory processing families or the autistic families but just for families eating real food because that in itself is deemed abnormal certainly in a party environment.

Can you start to maybe, let's have a look at some tips around when we're teaching kids about fake, processed, additive laden food, how to help them feel confident that we're not the enemy, and it's not like a parent against child issue. Let's start there, what are your thoughts on that?

D: There's so much to think about as parents and parents are always just trying to get the balance. They want to give their child enough autonomy and independence to make their own decisions but at the same time they want to protect them against danger, and they want to protect them against, like you said, those kind of additive laden foods that might have a really quite immediate impact on the psychological functioning or their behavior as well. An example of maybe the impact certain foods can have psychologically. I think a range of foods, I've always been really interested on the food and mood connection which is so intrinsically linked and that starts from day one, as we know as babies when we're hungry and we're not it's just the same responses when we need to go to the toilet. Somewhere along the way that kind connection gets a little bit interrupted and as a psychologist that's something that I really strive to reconnect you know that basic





main influencing factors in any child's attitude towards their body or food is parents obviously, then you've got your extended family, or your grandparents, you know kind of having their own ways and attitudes towards food and kids are around that, and aunts and uncles and then you've got friends, of course they're gonna be a bit of a social marker for maybe what's cool and what's not. And then you've got the media which is almost like the super peer and there's someone who's saying what the perfect ideal is and particularly advertising, children are very, very, very profit-making margin of society and the advertising companies will target them hugely thinking about any of the additive laden foods, they're just so fun-looking and really appealing. So it's really important to provide education to your children, have conversations with them, know what they're watching and talk to them about that, about what advertising is, about how it creates the need and then say wait actually I got the answer. All about education is really really important in kind of building up a bit more of a tough skin towards those pressures.

A: I think you're absolutely right and that's something we suggest in our course which is to really let them know that it's not us being the bad guy, it's the companies. And that is not like cheap deflection, it's actually the truth, we're not the bad guy for wanting them to eat beautiful healthful food. But it doesn't mean, you brought the word up a couple of times, peers, it doesn't save the fact, it's lovely to teach them yes being different is one of the magical things about being human and how wonderful is it that you're different from your friends, that doesn't help little 6 year old Johnny at the birthday party not feel different, let's just say he's either got an allergy or he gets really sensitive to additives and so the parents prefer that he doesn't eat those foods.

How do we build resilience in the child to feel strong rather than them missing out. Is there a way we can do that?

D: There's a multitude of ways and that's in regards to particular things like food practices but generally for a child's overall well-being in order to make them more confident to speak about it and stand up for themselves. One of the main things we need to foster is a really healthy self-esteem. There's a lot of ways that you can do that and some of them are what we talked about before is being a motion coach spiritual journey, you know really role modeling what nice, respectful interactions are with your partner, be complimentary towards them, comment on their interaction style, wow you've been really caring, or you're really funny or you were really strong there the way you kind of suit up for yourself.

A: It's true, we have these kids and then the kids become our world and then the partners take a backseat, it's true.

D: And we forget that, we forget that these people around us, they may be small but we need to speak to them in just a respectful manner as we speak to each other, if they see us being respectful towards each other and being assertive and saying how you feel, I feel angry because, I feel happy because, you're giving your child some really lovely labels to be able to go out into the world and actually feel confident to be able to say how they feel.

A: I love that. And just that simple fact, if you've got a real smile on your face when you pick them up from school sharing why and telling them about that.

D: With your own body, commenting on the things you like about your body, I think my hair looks great today. Self esteem isn't about your child thinking they're perfect all the time. Balanced self esteem is about having acknowledgement of the areas that maybe you don't like so much about yourself with the areas that maybe you're not so great in, so you go oh you know I'm not really good at math but actually I'm really good at this. When a child goes to the parts you've been and they have their comments, oh why don't you eat that, you know I like a different food so I can actually run and play and this food makes me feel really good, this food makes me feel that yuck and I'm not able to play them and everybody's different, and everyone's body is different and that's pretty cool. If the child thinks that there's much more to them than just how they look or what they eat, then they've got that really good foundation, they've got that ground and their self esteem will help them to negotiate whatever comes at them in the world. We can't protect them from everything, kids can be cruel but kids can be really amazing too and are found from going into schools and doing this work. Particularly the primary schools, it's just so amazing when you chat to young kids and they just get it. They are taking everything in and when you give them small messages like it's okay to be different, it's not only okay but it's brilliant. Put up your hand and tell me what you're





A: So I'm thinking it would be quite a fine line we tread as real food families, being the odd ones out especially in the big social occasions, how do keep our kids resilient and healthy in that fine line and not turn it into eating real food being an eating disorder in itself?

D: I think again, family meals like you mentioned before such an important time to be able to enjoy food, to show that it's not restricted is a really good model core division of responsibility which is something in the program I work for body confident child, it's an evidence based model that you decide when and what the child eats and the child decides how much. So it's not restrictive in any sense, they're getting to learn when they're full or when they're hungry and you're allowing them the autonomy to do that. But also so they're getting at the food pyramid, showing kids that at the top of the food pyramid and a tiny little thing, there are sometimes foods, it's okay to have those at some occasions but if you want to be able to run around, if you want to have energy, you have to have more of the everyday foods and that's not an eating disorder, it's just a really healthy balanced choice. But doing everything as a family, doing the physical activities as a family, making it fun. So when you're doing those silly dances, they're out there sitting with your cats, wow, darn we had it earlier, really have loads and loads of energy so they can actually convert okay food is something that's for energy and when they get to those parties, you'll probably notice your anxiety triggered a little bit when they're kind of running to the table but as much as possible be relaxed, just stand back a little bit and trust that they probably will be able to come to their own decision-making process as well and they are a lot more perceptive than what we give them credit for. So if we're possible being a little bit relaxed around the sometimes foods but also noticing your own anxiety around comments from parents, it's exactly the same anxiety that your child is feeling. So if you feel the need to explain yourself or to feel defensive about it, then that's gonna happen for your child as well, that's gonna replicate but if you relax about it and just say yeah this is just the attitude that we have at home where we like to kind of get lots of different types of food and I'm like really, they don't really work for us. I love food, it's great but change the subject, we move on to something that's not so boring and parents will move on very very quickly but it's getting aware about the talk around your child as well. And if particularly extended family members your noticing that they're commenting a lot in their own bodies, a lot on dieting, there's a lot of stigma around appearance, that's something that's really important to model at home, that we don't stigmatize based on appearance, that eating healthily isn't about being thin and looking certain ways, about having energy to do the things we want to do. And those are really important messages that children will learn and not just stigmatize people, that thin doesn't mean healthy and fat doesn't mean unhealthy. They're not messages that are appropriate for children.

A: And I guess thin doesn't mean better accepted and fat doesn't mean less accepted and all the things that we attach to thin and fat.

D: Exactly. So being very respectful and appreciative of lots of different shapes and sizes and acknowledging that that's okay is a really important part of making children not feel like they're being restricted in any way and being relaxed yourself as well. And again just education, education you know get your food pyramid, and if your child's saying I want the sometimes foods all the time, start saying but if you're having the sometimes foods all the time then you're not gonna be able to do all the things that you want to do, sometimes foods are there to have sometimes.

A: And the sometimes foods we're obviously talking about are really beautiful home-made cakes or at least made that are additive free because unfortunately I find one of the faults with the food pyramid is those sometimes foods is something that the companies then come, well Coca-Cola is a sometimes food, and Twix bars and Kit Kat are sometimes food, and they're non-food so to me the sometimes food are the beautiful cupcakes, cakes, custards that mom makes and things like that. You know, home-made is definitely an emphasis because then we've got control on what's in them. There's another confusion in our food culture in Australia or America, in the UK which is the blurry lines of what that sometimes food piece is when it gets taught in our schools and processed food is in there.

D: That's a really good point. Advertising companies what they will brand as sometimes foods or everyday foods like some cereal bars or some things like that, that are packed loaded with sugar they're not an everyday food but they're being sold and targeted towards children. And third is as you said about educating yourself so you can educate your child and seeing what is in things. Yes, sometimes foods it means that's something that's a treat but I think it's really important to know what the not-treat as well for your child. And again, it's about doing what you need to do for your family. I think that people





maybe might get more frustrated and you might encounter some challenges when people interpret that as something that you are advising them and that's where conflict can begin. But if you can be relaxed and confident and comfortable in your own decisions with them regards to what you do as a parent then you can go far along.

A: I love that Dei, because there's a lot of tension at that social exchange moment and it's something I felt a little bit at the start certainly when my little man was having an issue and we had him off dairy for years. Dairy is just everywhere with small children, the cup of milk comes out in every opportunity at every house and I had that re-visit at 12 years ago when I was deemed gluten-intolerant and I thought oh my God here we are again, I'm that person again, I was very used to being gluten-intolerant 12 years on, but then I had to do it with my child and I just felt horrible. But moved through that pretty quickly when I realized that that anxiety projects to them, they're like little dogs aren't they they just pick up on anything, every possible emotion you're feeling it's like on your sleeve and in their heart.

D: And that's not something to be scared of either. That naturally is seeing real emotion, anger, sadness, those are really important things for children because they learn that those emotions are okay. It's okay to be scared, it's okay to be a bit confused and to name that. I think again education is such an important thing that schools can do, teachers they're also in a privileged position to educate children. I've had a few clients who also have had allergies but the other kids in their classes so respectful of that because they've had a lesson on it, they had a lesson on what gluten intolerance is or what dairy intolerance is, some of the effects of that. And they're so protective over their classmate that you have any allergies, it's really sweet.

A: that's a beautiful thing to bring up so maybe for our parents who have the allergy or have the autistic child some on that spectrum, ADHD and things really really affect. We're always scared of and quick to judge and pass things we don't understand, so why not help the people that don't understand but offer in to come in and do a quick 10-minute class talk, and maybe make a treat that is gluten and dairy free if those are the allergies, or egg free or nut free, whatever it has to be, how yummy are some of the foods that doesn't have those things in it that little Johnny can enjoy. I love that idea, great. Just to turn this into a proactive positive pace where we can educate others on allergies instead of feeling really alone about that allergy and really defensive about it, flip the coin, get proactive, educate even if it has to be you, doesn't matter if you've never given a speech before, you're just in front of a bunch of 10 year olds, like just get in there and have a chat, maybe download some printables from online if you find them.

D: If you're giving out free food kids are gonna love it no matter what it is. And it's just sort of normalizing it once children are exposed to something in a repeated safe way, it becomes normal, it becomes accepted, it's not taboo anymore. It's when children don't have enough information and then they make assumptions about things because they're confused so if you give them enough information then they can come to their own decisions. But education really is key. If we can get into schools and start at a primary prevention level, the younger the better. You're doing these workshops with parents, I've learned so many tips from parents that I feed on to parents then, and it's just a really lovely opportunity for parents to get together in a supportive way rather than a judgmental way and that's what creates progress, and that's what fosters progression like I said. And it's fun, it's really fun to just sit down and have a chat about current issues and things that are relevant in any parent's life. So that's what I would say, talk about it, education is key, prevention is key and to just be perceptive, have your antennas out, be a little bit of a detective. Noticing and having awareness, if you have an awareness of your own attitudes towards yourself then you'll just be that but be more careful to avoid speaking about those in front of your kids who might internalize them as their own.

A: I love that, and then in the social context, to teach them to be really relaxed about it. As a family, we've realized that this works for us, so for your allergy or your kids' allergy, affected kids, yeah that just really really makes me sick so I don't eat them when you're at someone's house and teach them that it's not something to be stressed about, it's just a fact and you move on and I love how simple that is. Quite often we over-complicate things, life's gonna be difficult forever because of little Johnny's dairy allergy. If we actually just make it not part of his story, not being this big thing that we all have to carry as a family, just say yeah dairy just doesn't work for him so we've worked out this really delicious way to make custard now, I'll bring some next time, don't worry about it and just make it really really relaxed. And I think that in itself for some of the more anxious parents in our community, is a skill to build. Don't feel bad about yourself if you haven't got that relaxed vibe today or tomorrow the next week. It might be a little habit to sort of focus on cultivating.





D: Absolutely. And it takes a lot of practice and it takes time to be able to sit with distress is a real skill, to not act on that is a real skill and knowing that any distress you feel, it will pass through you like a wave. You just have to ride that wave a little bit and then kind of see how things turn out. Have people to talk to, have support for yourself, communicate your concerns to someone. Lots of parents go online, there's always lovely forms of how parents can speak to each other about their concerns, and courses like these that you're running are a really visual opportunity to do that as well. I think the main thing is that message of just trying to get the balance and there is no right or wrong.

Just to let you know as well that myself and my partner, my co-partner, Jojo Cowman, that we've established an organization called Magnificently You. We wrote a book called The Magnificent Toby Plum, the book is just a children's book around accepting differences and the main character goes on this really fun journey around the world, and really wants to fit in at the beginning and be the same as everyone but he kinds of learn pretty quickly that it's his unique traits that make him who he is and make the world fun. And we've got some discussion points for parents that they can go through the book and talk about with their child and have the book as a focal point. If you're interested in that you can find that at our website and I'll give you all the information. And also, just to finish, I know parents love lists of do's and don'ts, what we have here is promoting positive body image and healthy eating in your family, just a list of do's and don'ts, which if any parents want, I can send off to them as well.

