

CRUNCH BITES PODCAST

BITE SIZED CHILDREN'S NUTRITION INFO

Episode 2 - Developing positive relationships with food and body image in children with Dr Stephanie Damiano

Mikala: Hello, and welcome to Crunch Bites, a podcast for parents where we discuss all things children's nutrition and inspire you to build those healthy habits in the home. Join us as we chat about picky eating, reaching for rainbow foods, packing school lunches that actually get eaten, and so much more. Brought to you by Crunch and Sip and presented by Qualified Nutritionists. This podcast is packed with goodness and full of fresh ideas.

This episode discusses eating disorders and body image concerns. Please look after yourself when listening and take a break if needed. Information on where you can go for support will be featured at the end of the episode, as well as included within the show notes.

Hello, and welcome to this episode of Crunch Bites. I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation, and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. I'd also like to pay my respect to Elders and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people living and working in this area.

So today we're going to launch into a really big topic. We are fortunate enough to be chatting with Dr. Stephanie Damiano from the Butterfly Foundation. Stephanie is the manager of the Butterfly Body Bright program and does a lot of really important work in the body image and positive relationship with food space, and specifically works with families and young people to help build those healthy behaviours. So welcome, Stephanie.

Stephanie: Thanks so much for having me.

Mikala: We always kick off our episodes with a little bit of sponsorship. So just to let everyone know that this podcast today is brought to you by potatoes. Potatoes are one of those veggies that get a really bad wrap, but they're actually really good for gut health. They do have fibre, always good to leave the skin on when you're cooking them. And, you know, important to remember to try all the different varieties rather than just sticking with one because there's lots to explore. You're a fan of potato, aren't you, Stephanie?

Stephanie: I am.

Mikala: And what's your favourite way to prepare them in your house?

Stephanie: So many different ways. I feel like it's a very versatile vegetable, but I love roast potatoes.

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Mikala: Yeah. Roast potato wedges are a hit in our house. Yeah. Okay. So, we're going to launch right in. As I said, Stephanie works for the Butterfly Foundation. Let's start by just learning a bit more about you, Stephanie, if you can tell us a bit about yourself, a bit about your background, and a bit about the actual Butterfly Foundation.

Stephanie: Well, so I'm a mum of two young children and a researcher with a PhD in psychology. And I've dedicated my research career to really understanding the development of children's body image and creating education resources and programs for families and primary schools and so, this led me to Butterfly Foundation and the role of developing and disseminating our primary school body image program, Butterfly Body Bright and this provides resources for a whole school approach to promoting a positive body image and a healthy relationship with food and physical activity in children.

Mikala: Amazing. And that's some really important work going on in that space. Yeah. So, can you start by just explaining to people on a simple level, what is body image?

Stephanie: Yeah. So, body image is the way we think and feel about our bodies. So, it's actually not dependent on how a person actually looks. There's often this perception that because somebody might fit the societal ideal for what is beautiful, then they must have a good body image or a positive body image. But we know that that's not the case. So irrespective of how someone looks, they can experience all different sorts of thoughts and feelings about their body.

Mikala: Which must, I suppose, make that a difficult thing to then know is going on for someone because it doesn't fit any particular mould.

Stephanie: Correct. Anyone can experience body dissatisfaction. It doesn't discriminate.

Mikala: And so, expanding on that, if we talk about body dissatisfaction, which is obviously a driver, an underlying driver, what does that look like for people?

Stephanie: So, body dissatisfaction is when someone has a negative body image. So, as I said, our body image is the way we think and feel about our body. So, if someone has body dissatisfaction and they're feeling mostly negative or dissatisfied thoughts and feelings and perceptions about how they look. So, it might be their body generally, or it might be a particular body part or aspect of their appearance. And it's, I guess, feeling that most of the time. So, body dissatisfaction or body image is very fluid, and it can change and can be different in different situations. But we would consider somebody to have body dissatisfaction if they're having those negative thoughts and feelings most of the time.

Mikala: And then does the experience around body dissatisfaction have a co-relationship or sort of sit closely alongside one's relationship with food?

Stephanie: Yes. So, we know that body dissatisfaction is one of the leading risk factors for disordered eating or the development of an eating disorder. And so, when we're talking about disordered eating, this is thinking around disturbed and unhealthy eating patterns that usually occur for the purpose of changing a person's body size or weight. So, if somebody is dissatisfied with their size or weight, then they're more likely to engage in disordered eating behaviours to try to control or change their weight. And so that might be things like restrictive dieting or compulsive eating, skipping meals or cutting out particular food groups, using things like diet pills or other sort of supplements. But then it can also extend to exercise and, you know, over-exercising or using exercise as a way to sort of control the way we look. And I think one of the challenges that we face is that unfortunately, a lot of these disordered eating behaviours are actually quite normalised in our society now.

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Mikala: Yeah, well, and that's exactly as you're talking, I'm thinking to myself, it feels like such a familiar list of behaviours that, you know, were all around me and the girls particularly that I was in school with, you know, these are sort of practices that were way too accepted amongst, you know, young children, teenagers, young adults. Further question to that is, like, is there a specific age group where this is most common or are we seeing that it's happening younger, or what are the trends?

Stephanie: So, I mean, I think we once thought that body dissatisfaction and disordered eating was something that we started to see in the adolescent years and it was something, you know, that it was a typical teenage sort of behaviour or an experience. And we certainly know that times of physical transition, like puberty or pregnancy in that postpartum period are times of greater risk of body dissatisfaction or disordered eating. But we certainly have evidence that body dissatisfaction is happening much earlier than puberty. We've certainly got evidence that's quite consistently showing us now that around 50% of pre-adolescent girls are demonstrating body dissatisfaction, which presents the desire to be thinner than they are. But then we've also got evidence that showing body dissatisfaction developing as early as five and six. In the development of our Body Bright program, we conducted a survey with some adults who had a lived experience of developing body dissatisfaction during their primary school years. And what we saw with that was that around a third of respondents said that they developed their body dissatisfaction between five and seven. So it is, it does show that these issues can start really early in life.

Mikala: Is there a changing trend around gender then as well, or are we still predominantly seeing this as occurring in girls?

Stephanie: Historically, we, it was seen to be more of an issue that just affected girls. And we certainly have seen a shift in this over time. The research does still show that females and gender-diverse youth are more likely to report body dissatisfaction than males, but we've certainly seen body dissatisfaction become increasingly relevant for boys. And I think if we think about how it presents quite differently. So, for girls, there's often this desire to be thinner than they are. Whereas for boys, it's often this desire to be more muscular than they are. And if we think at a society level, how those ideals have changed for boys over time, we can sort of see why that's the case. Like if we look at the physique of superheroes, for example, like now they look a lot more muscly and buff than they did, you know, say 20 years ago. And we're seeing that in action figures and cartoons and costumes and all sorts of things. So, we can certainly understand why we're seeing this greater emphasis for our young boys.

Mikala: Yeah, I feel like that's the case across the board in all media, in all forms of media, that the people that we see on screens are this sort of polished or, you know, apex kind of form rather than real relatable people. It's like we've lost a comfort almost with celebrating all shapes and sizes and the norm, you know, in that aspirational space.

Stephanie: Yeah, we certainly know that the societal ideals of beauty and appearance ideals play a big role in how people are seeing themselves in the world. And it's challenging because those ideals change over time. So, if we think about, you know, a female body and the ideal and how that has changed from, you know, the 1920s to the 1950s, like to today, ideals are changing all the time, but the human body isn't changing in that same way. And so, we're certainly seeing, particularly across social media, a greater movement for authenticity and diversity in bodies, but we've certainly got a long way to go.

Mikala: Yeah, I feel as though that conversation that is going on is reaching kids though, at least the tentacles are starting to touch because it is something that my daughter actually raised with me. Yesterday we were walking our dogs, and she was saying how she is noticing that conversation and that celebration and that acceptance of imperfectionism and,

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you know, that that's sitting really well with her. So, you know, I find that really positive when she said that she has an awareness that there's this conversation going on. So important work is obviously starting to, you know, reach the people that it needs to.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's fantastic to hear. And I think it's, it's wonderful to hear young people acknowledging, I think the importance of celebrating diversity, because I think that's a really big step forward when we're trying to tackle weight stigma, for example, which is, you know, such a big driver for why this is such an issue.

Mikala: Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I saw on your website that I really loved was well-being overweight. I think that you know, that's such a lovely change in perspective that we just want to grab a hold of and celebrate because for too long, it's been this, this really one-sided and limited understanding of what healthy actually means.

Stephanie: Yeah, absolutely. And I think we really need to try to step away from this idea of healthy being this. I think it's just viewed so narrowly. And we've got research with Australian children that shows that when you ask a child, what does it mean to be healthy? They think it means eating fruits and vegetables and being thin. And healthy is so much more than that. It's making sure that they're getting enough sleep and that they're looking after their teeth and that they're moving their bodies in ways that feel good and, you know, not for the purpose of weight loss and that, you know, having that healthy relationship with food and eating like that all becomes part of what is, you know, what is healthy and, you know, broadly health and wellbeing.

Mikala: And also, so much more space there for lovely feedback and feeling good and positivity, because there's all those different layers of, yeah, coming together to create that lovely picture of health.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's right.

Mikala: So, in one of your comments before you talked about parents having that recollection of, of being very young and then, you know, having a sense of body dissatisfaction themselves, what's the impact for them as parents and for their children?

Stephanie: I think parents are a lot more aware of the experiences that children might face around their bodies and body image and relationship with eating. And I think the positive in that is that what we hear from parents a lot of the time is that they want to be positive role models for their child, that they don't want to pass on the concerns and the experiences that they had. And so, I think that's where it's so valuable then to be able to provide, you know, strength-based resources for parents so that they can promote in, you know, household environments where their child is more likely to develop a more positive body image and that healthy relationship with, with eating and physical activity.

Mikala: Yeah, absolutely. So, for parents who might be listening, what does, what does that healthy modelling look like? What does a positive relationship with food look like and how do they encourage that for their children?

Stephanie: Yeah, so I think, I guess there's probably three ideas that I'd like to touch on. The first is, and I think overall it's thinking about the role modelling and the language used. I think they're critical in sort of all of these, but I think first it's wanting to avoid speaking negatively about bodies, food, eating, movement. So, in relation to food, it would involve, you know, not saying things that, you know, food is good or bad or that there's healthy food and unhealthy food or using the terms like junk food. Anything that sort of places a moral value on food is not helpful in fostering that positive relationship with food for children. And so, I guess the flip side to that is referring to food for fuel and nourishment, but also enjoyment.

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So, when we're thinking about what is healthy eating, it's seeing that, and I guess moving away from the idea that food just needs to be full of nutrients for it to be healthy because then we forget the importance that enjoyment and pleasure plays in having that healthy relationship with food and eating. And I guess it's, you know, touching on, like I said earlier, that kids see healthy as eating fruits and vegetables, but we know that if that's all they ate, they would actually miss out on other important nutrients that are required for their bodies to function. And, you know, of course, we want them to see, you know, fruits and vegetables as being nutritious and healthy, but then for example, there's certain fruits or vegetables that aren't considered, I guess, healthy for somebody who say got a fructose intolerance, then might not be able to. So, when we sort of put those labels on food, it becomes really complex for children to sort of, I guess, unpack and understand what that really means.

Mikala: Yeah, I absolutely love this approach. I think it's really wonderful because it does highlight that food is this celebration and to be enjoyed and is more than just nourishing your body. And I think that's a really wonderful way to, just to have that conversation with kids. I think that I mean, yeah, continue on, but I'm loving sort of filing that one away for my own conversations with my kids, because having a nutrition background, you do fall into the trap of talking about the health of, you know, of choosing those, you know, nutrient-dense foods. And sometimes you miss that opportunity to just actually savour something really delicious just because you really enjoy it. And that's what it is.

Stephanie: Yeah. And so, I think that that as a part of that, you know, seeing what healthy eating is, it is really drawing on that enjoyment and that social connection. So, you know, chocolate may not be considered the healthiest in terms of most nutritious food, but if it brings joy, then that's contributing to a positive relationship with food, which may prevent the later onset of an eating disorder or disordered eating, which is more critical for health. Or, you know, if making pancakes on a Sunday morning is a family tradition, then there's that, you know, family connection and coming together, and that forms part of healthy eating. So, I think, yeah, trying to sort of broaden that idea of health is one really helpful way. I think a second is trying to avoid having really strict rules around food, I guess, obviously as a role model, but also in the language used around children and the behaviours that we might try to promote in children. So, I guess as an adult, you want to try to avoid engaging in restrictive diets or really extreme dieting practices. Obviously, excluding from that as always, anything that's got a religious basis or due to some sort of diagnosed condition, children are paying attention to what we as adults are doing and saying. And we do have quite a lot of research that shows that dieting behaviours of parents, mothers in particular, but I don't want to add to the mum guilt that we as mothers already face, but the research shows that those dieting behaviours can have a negative impact on their child. We've got a lot of evidence to suggest that. But what we also know is that if we're restricting children from particular foods, it actually increases the likelihood of them bingeing on those foods than when they're available. And we often hear from parents that, you know, they're anxious that their child is eating too many, I don't know what the best terminology to use, but low nutrient or discretionary or sometimes foods and not enough of those foods that are high in nutrients. And, you know, that's an understandable concern when we're thinking about health broadly, but instead of the taking away or restricting those low nutrient foods using the add method. So, thinking of ways to add more of the foods that you might want your child to be eating more of and not eliminating the other, you know, the other foods. And then I think the third point, and I guess it's related to these points, is that we know that for many parents, there's a lot of anxiety around, is my child eating the right food? Are they getting enough nutrients? Are they eating enough or too much? And I think it's completely understandable that we are concerned about our children, but then it's also completely understandable in the very diet-culture-fuelled world that we live in. And so, a point that I think I'd like to make, which I think can be a real game changer for some parents is understanding that nutrient intake spans, you know, over a week or two weeks or, you know, longer. And so, trying not to stress about having that perfect balanced meal or the perfect lunch box on any given day, but sort of

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taking that step back and considering whether they're having a variety of foods over, you know, the course of a week or two weeks. I think that that can really help to alleviate some of the pressure and stress that we often place on ourselves.

Mikala: I completely agree. And, you know, I love the way that that gives people permission to just let go and to have more of a sort of, you know, rather than a micro view, more of a macro view and more ability to sort of, yeah, think and look broadly. Know that we often say to parents in our sessions, like, do your best. There's no one-size-fits-all model. Some days will be great. Some days will feel like incredible flops and that's completely fine. You know, you can't tick all boxes all the time in any capacity. So, I agree with you. I think that's quite a game changer because I think it just gives, it gives a sense of ease for parents that, that they don't have to sort of stress about everything on such a daily or meal-based level.

Stephanie: Yeah, I think so. And again, it does help us to take that step back and think about health a bit more broadly than just that, you know, that perfect lunchbox or that perfect meal.

Mikala: Yeah. I also love what you said about the family traditions because, in our house, Sunday pancakes have often been so loved. And I remember as a child as well, that they were such a wonderful celebration of food. And yes, there was, you know, more toppings on the table than you would normally have during the week, but that's what made it so much fun. And also, there was this, there was this journey there for us about how much is too much because sometimes, you know, a few too many pancakes or a few too many toppings, and you would learn that lesson for yourself that, oh, okay. I, you know, I know where my, my full amount is a bit better because I've been allowed to sort of explore it in my own way.

Stephanie: Yes and I think that's such an important point. And when we think, you know, particularly for typically developing children, helping them to pay attention to those internal cues of hunger and fullness, they can only do that if they're given the opportunity to do that. And I often reflect on thinking about how when they're babies and they're either breastfed or bottle fed, they stop when they're done and we accept that and we say, okay, they're done. Or when they start eating solids and they start to push it away or throw it on the floor, on the floor. But then as they get older, we think that we need to start imposing rules around it and that, oh no, you can't possibly be full on just that. Or, oh no, what do you mean you want more? Like surely you're full now, but really helping them to be able to decide when it is that they're full.

Mikala: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Because yeah, at the end of the day, we're not going to be there long-term overseeing this journey for them. So, it is so important that they develop that autonomy and understand those cues and, you know, grow into fully fledged adults with a lovely, healthy relationship with the food that they choose to reach for.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's right.

Mikala: So, on the flip side to this, what are some of the things that parents should be concerned about or would be encouraged to look out for if some disordered eating or, you know, some worrying behaviours were occurring within the household?

Stephanie: So, I think one of the first things to look out for is any changes. So, any changes in the way your child is talking or behaving or any signs of their thinking changing around their body movement, eating. Are they appearing to have increased body dissatisfaction? So, are they appearing to be dissatisfied more often? Are they wishing to look like someone else more than, you know, I guess the typical child of wanting to look like, you know, a superstar or their role model or whatever it is, but it's starting to sort of impact them a bit more. Are they attaching, I guess, their self-worth and their value to the way they look or the

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size or shape of their body? Do they have a growing sort of preoccupation with how their body looks? And are they sort of making more frequent comments about the bits that they don't like or commenting about, you know, particular foods and the impact that foods might have on their body? And I guess then the sort of next step or related to that is thinking about, are they talking about or already actively engaging in different habits around their eating or physical activity? So, you know, have they started to cut particular foods or food groups? Are they starting to sort of show, I guess, the early signs of dieting-type behaviours or a desire to diet? So, they would sort of be, I guess, the sort of warning signs or red flags that I would look out for in this age group.

Mikala: That's a really tricky one though, because how do you balance what's somewhat normal with them growing an awareness of, oh, actually being, you know, moving my body more makes me feel good, so I'm going to develop some positive, you know, physical activity habits or, oh, I, you know, when I eat well or I, you know, have a few more veggies on my plate, I, you know, I'm more regular or whatever it might be. So how do you kind of balance? Well, there's going to be changes as they go from being a child to a teen and grow that awareness. How do you balance that with too much, too far, something to be concerned about?

Stephanie: Well, I think the examples you provided there are not the reasons of concern. So, if they're talking about things to, you know, help bowel movements and things like that, then that's, you know, positive and acknowledging the impacts that different foods can have on supporting our bodies. I think it's more if they're starting to say, I'm not eating that because that's bad, or that's going to make me fat or it's using that sort of more negative language, which can be harder to detect sometimes, particularly as children get older and move into those teen years and they have more autonomy around the food that they're eating. But we do often hear from, from parents that it was easy to sort of miss those early signs because they thought, oh, they just thought that I just thought that my child was trying to be healthier and that was a really good thing. But what they were doing was just cutting foods out, but not adding others in. So, I think, you know, we often hear from parents that it's like, okay, my child wants to be a vegetarian, or they want to try that. And it's like, well, ensure that then they're making up for the nutrients that they're missing and that they're adequately fuelling their body with what it needs. So, it's, it is tricky. But I think it's thinking about that, that sort of balance around things. But I think it's also just going with your instinct. I think as parents or guardians, you know, your child better than anybody. And if something isn't feeling right, then exploring that further.

Mikala: And, and when you say missing those signs, is, is there a kind of a, a critical window? Is there, is it the case that there's a, there's a moment in time where if you're a little bit more aware and interject or start those conversations that you can sort of guide them down a better pathway than it becoming too exacerbated for them?

Stephanie: Yeah. I mean, I think certainly everyone's experience is different, but what we know is that the earlier we can intervene with any concerns that are starting to develop, the earlier we can intervene, the easier it is to redirect, I guess, that child's journey to an eating disorder. So, we would certainly recommend that parents reach out for professional support as early as possible so that they can avoid, you know, the later onset of more serious issues.

Mikala: So, it can be as simple as jumping on your website and, and, you know, making contact and to saying, here's my situation. You know, what support is there or is there anyone I can chat to?

Stephanie: Yeah, absolutely. So, I think the first step, if parents are concerned is to, I guess, educate yourself. So, the Butterfly website or the Body Bright website, a great place to start just to understand, I guess the the realm of what is sort of normal behaviour. And then when

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do things start to become more concerning, and then reaching out for support as soon as possible. So, a trusted GP or pediatrician, and we've certainly got the butterfly national helpline that is there to support individuals as well as, you know, carers, um, or anyone within a person's support network.

Mikala: Wonderful that it's such a user-friendly website like I myself found when I was looking through it. It's beautifully laid out. It's really easy to figure out where you need to go. You know, I think for parents it's a really invaluable resource. So, I think that the Butterfly Foundation and the associated programs within schools are doing a really wonderful job.

Stephanie: Thank you. Yes, we're quite proud of, um, of all the offerings that we have, and certainly, for parents of primary school-aged children, we've got our Butterfly Body Bright website that got free resources specifically around this topic for primary school-aged children and then for parents of teens. We've also got, um, our Body Kind Families program, um, that has, you know, videos and tip sheets and all sorts of free information to really help, um, in the, I guess, the prevention of significant body dissatisfaction and, and disordered eating.

Mikala: Awesome. I'm actually going to pop all those links in the show notes for this podcast, because I think that, um, there'll be lots of people who are keen to, to jump on and actually use those and find out more. So amazing. Thank you. It was a really I don't want to say meaty or juicy or anything food related, because it always sounds really pun, like, but um, really great chat. Like, I really enjoyed breaking it down with you. If you had an elevator pitch for parents, if you just had a minute or two to kind of give them some, some, um, either targeted, you know, quick tips or summarize what you've said, um, you know, what would you leave people with?

Stephanie: I think we know that promoting a positive body image and a healthy relationship with food starts from childhood, so families should really try to equip themselves with the knowledge and resources to promote that positive body image and that healthy relationship with food and movement in their children. Um, but then also try to get their schools on board so that we know that the more children can receive positive and consistent messages about their body, the more impactful that's going to be.

Mikala: Yeah, absolutely. And I like as well that there is somewhere for parents to go and something that they can do. So, there's some lovely immediate action for them to be able to take. Amazing. Thanks, Stephanie. Um, I really enjoyed this chat today. If you did too then please make sure to like, comment, and share, and, uh, we will check back in next time. Thanks for joining us everyone.

If you or anyone you know needs support, please call Butterfly's national helpline on 1800 E.D. Hope that's 1800 334 673 or visit the website to chat online or email support@butterfly.org.au

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