

Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Season 2 Episode 7 with Carole Parker and, special guest host, Caroline Heeris

Caroline Heeris

This podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people. We respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community, and honour First Nations people, past and present in the spirit of reconciliation.

Positive Childhoods is produced as part of the Children Week celebrations in WA and is funded by the Department of Education and Lotterywest. Thank you so much to those educators, parents, and others listening in today, we really appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast, finding time in your busy day to know more about how we can support the needs of children.

I'm Caroline Heeris, Advisor for Integrated Education at Meerilinga. Over the years it has been my great pleasure to be part of the Children's Week team advocating for the Rights of the Child and organising events across WA to celebrate Children's Week and to promote the right of children to a positive childhood.

Children's Week is an annual event celebrated nationally across Australia around the fourth Wednesday of October, which is recognized as UNICEF's International Children's Day, each Australian state or territory has a convener, and in WA, that role has fallen for over 35 years to Meerilinga.

Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation registered charity that promotes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, working with children, their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in WA. The 2022 Children's Week theme is: "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development."

The guests for this podcast is Carole Parker and accredited practising dietitian who holds a Masters degree in Nutrition and Dietetics. Carole has worked in the field of nutrition since 2009. She currently works as a mobile private practice dietitian and supporting families under the NDIS and Community Diagnostics. She's also a guest presenter at Meerilinga Training College, presenting nutrition in the early years to the students studying Diploma or Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. Prior to this, Carole was also involved in the development of Meerilinga's Toddler Tucker Project, a nutrition program for Aboriginal families and their carers.

So, when considering the Children's Week theme, all children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development, Carole, what would you like our audience to know about you and your story?

Carole Parker

Well, I have been affiliated with Meerilinga since 2012, initially as a nutritionist in the Toddler Tucker Program as you mentioned, and I've always had a passion for good health and nutrition. And more importantly, good nutrition to support our next generation, our children. And of course, in return, good nutrition supports their well-being for optimal health and development. So that passion continues through from when I very first started right up till now, focusing on children.

Caroline Heeris

So, tell me a little bit more about how nutrition actually helps children to have improved well-being and healthy development.

Carole Parker

Well, we all want our children to feel good about themselves, and we want them to thrive both physically and mentally. And of course, how a child eats really affects their health, both now and in the future. So, we do need to provide good nutrition to nourish the brain and to build good strong bodies: calcium for bones, protein for their muscles, carbohydrates for their energy, and of course their brain functions – or everybody's brain functions – on glucose. And also fats for our bodies, and the fats also help absorb nutrients found in foods like fish and nuts, and also provide iron for healthy blood.

We also want them to develop healthy habits that may continue through their life.

Caroline Heeris

You said previously that you had worked with Meerilinga on the program called Toddler Tucker–

Carole Parker

Yes

Caroline Heeris

–that was based specifically for Aboriginal families, can you talk a little bit about why there was a need to design a resource based specifically...

Carole Parker

Absolutely. Then that was the idea of the toddler Tucker program was to get that information out right across WA.

Caroline Heeris

Because I understand then obviously fresh produce when you have families who live in such regional and remote areas, getting fresh produce out to those families would be a challenge.

Carole Parker

Oh, absolutely. Particularly if it's in an area that gets flooded and there's no accessibility like up north in particular. And the cost, the cost is absolutely 3, 4, 5 times the amount that it is down here in Perth.

Caroline Heeris

So, Toddler Tucker, actually provided an educational resource to give families who lived in more regional remote areas some ideas of nutrition, recipes, and things that they could do to actually support their children growth and development.

Carole Parker

And also encourage families to grow their own if they can. Also, that tin food and frozen food is OK. A lot of people think that the nutrition isn't there and it actually is. So yeah.

Caroline Heeris

OK, I know Carole – I've actually known Carole for many years, and I do understand that we both share a passion for the concept of rural food and that idea of trying to, wherever you can, create so from scratch. And one of the conversations that we've had on many occasions is the inclusion of sugar in young children's diets, can you give us a little bit of an idea of the effect of a diet for a child that is overloaded with sugar.

Carole Parker

Well, they're getting a lot of glucose. However, they're not getting their other nutrition that they need. Often the sugary foods, because they taste better, they tend to want them more. And it's what they're exposed to. The easy, quick foods or the highly processed foods that you find on your supermarket shelf, they are high in added sugar, fat, and salt, which isn't good for any population, but because they're quick and easy to heat or to put you know, there's no preparation involved, the children are often given this instead of real foods.

Caroline Heeris

So that term 'empty calories' where we've got the concept of it's got the sugar, it's got the glucose, but it doesn't have any of the other nutrition that's required by the body.

Carole Parker

Yes, so they might be missing out. For an example, soft drinks is a is a big one and fruit juice. You [might] think fruit, yeah, it's the great nourishing food. It is in its whole entirety, when it's a whole fruit, but when it's in a juice, you're losing all the fibre, which is really important, and some of the nutrients attached to that.

And then again, milk is another one that, dairy is great, it's good for building bones, but you're missing out on a lot of nutrition. So when we get to processed foods, again we're getting

overload of sugar, glucose, which the body doesn't need it and it's filling them up and then they're having snacks in between, that is sugary snacks, they're not going to want their meals even if it is presented as a good wholesome meal.

Caroline Heeris

So, what would you say were the cornerstones of good nutrition for our children?

Carole Parker

What we eat has a major impact on our health.

Caroline Heeris

So we are what we eat?

Carole Parker

[Both laugh] Yep, exactly.

And poor nutrition has been linked to chronic disease and unfortunately Perth Children Hospital actually are seeing children under five with diabetes. So that is seriously a concern.

So going back to the processed foods and high sugar foods that we were talking about before, they're getting too much of this and not at good nutrition.

The cornerstone of good nutrition is eating from the five food groups and having a variety within each group. So your fruit and veggies think rainbow. There's a lot of education around having as many colours on your plate as possible on the day. Protein foods are the body builders. So as our children are growing, they're going to need the protein and that is really critical for iron is in your red meats, your Omega threes is in your fish, and also your plant-based proteins like your chickpeas, lentils.

And dairy foods, our main source is your yogurts, milk, and a little bit of cheese. And then of course your whole grains and cereals where it's really important with quality around here, having good whole grains and cereals that are unprocessed like your rolled oats for breakfast for an example.

And of course, choosing the less processed foods and going for mainly – did you know that children under two are probably eating enough veggies, but the two-year-olds and the four-to-eight-year-olds aren't eating enough vegetables. So about 99% of those children aren't enough vegetables.

Caroline Heeris

So I guess really that's a good lead into the next question that I had for you, Carole, which would be a lot of the time educators are approached by parents who have the dilemma that their child is a fussy eater or their child just refuses to try new foods? Would you have any advice to

educators to support parents in how we can encourage toddlers particularly who's favourite word is usually... how can we encourage our fussy eaters to actually try new foods?

Carole Parker

It's just the presentation. So, they eat what you eat and it's, I guess, going back to that Ellyn Satter Division of Responsibility, we provide the foods. Where they have them? At the table. And so being a role model in a family environment for mealtimes is really, really critical because if you're trying the foods, then the child is more likely to eat it. And often parents eat separate from their children, so they're not getting that role model experience, which is so important. We really should advocate to eat at the table because it's the perfect place to have that social meal where you can chat about the meal and expose children to foods. And don't forget it can take up to 32 times for a child to accept a food

Caroline Heeris

How many times?!

Carole Parker

32 or more. They- it's constant exposure and of course foods like your vegetables, some of them have got that bitter taste or that sour taste, so they might not like it immediately because young children they have, their tongues are smaller, they've got the same amount of taste buds that we have as an adult, but it's in a more concentrated area. So bitter to them is going to taste quite different to bitter to us. This is something that kids learn overtime, to either like or accept foods that they mightn't when they're younger. That's why that exposure is important and to keep on trying and be a good role model. Eat it yourself and talk about how wonderful, how good it is for our bodies, and have stories around that. Growing your own is a prime example of exposing children to foods because they can tend to it and then when it actually has food on the plant they can go and pick it and trial it just straight off the plant. What an experience.

Caroline Heeris

I have to admit my youngest particularly would be very reluctant to eat any fruit other than apple until we actually grew some blueberries and he started to eat those. He told me he didn't like blueberries, but in one hand had a pile of blueberries that he was quite enjoying eating. I have to say I am a great advocate for hiding a multitude of veggies in spaghetti bolognese sauce, I suppose that if you have to disguise vegetables in in certain ways to actually make sure that the children are eating them. That's something that you can do?

Carole Parker

Absolutely, although once they get a bit older and a bit smarter, yeah, actually start to lose their trust if you do that. And so you're actually better off getting them involved in the cooking and saying, hey, we're going to grate some zucchini and carrot in here, how about you get the grater out and maybe part of that, and then they're more likely to accept it.

Caroline Heeris

Okay, yes.

Carole Parker

But if they see it and you told them that it's there's no veggies and they caught out, then you're losing their trust. So it's a little bit of, yeah, we can do that earlier on in the piece, but once they get old enough to participate in cooking...

Caroline Heeris

So, I guess really, getting them to participate in the preparation of the family meal, mealtime. You're not only just teaching them about food preparation and nutrition, but it's also giving them skills for life because one day they are going to have to be able to provide themselves with a with a meal eventually.

Carole Parker

Yes, and a healthy one. If they've got the good role models.

Caroline Heeris

Carole, you talked a little bit about the cornerstones of good nutrition for children being the five food groups. What are the other factors that would contribute to children's health and wellbeing.

Carole Parker

Getting enough water. We're talking about sugar before, and how soft drinks can often and fruit juice override water. And so, if a child's thirsty, promote water and offer it on a regular basis rather than other drinks. Other drinks have their place, I'm not saying cut them out totally, but they in our society they override it [water].

And other factors such as getting enough sleep. It's really important to have a good routine around sleep because that will affect what we eat and how we feel during the day.

Getting enough exercise. If the child is doing a lot outside, they're going to get hungry and so what you put on the table they're more likely to eat if they're hungry. Unfortunately, our children have too much screen time and inside a lot, so they're not getting that appetite that they would if they were playing outside, so encouraging the balance between screen time and activity is important.

Caroline Heeris

So, we talk about encouraging an active lifestyle, so we are trying to encourage children to spend time outside and to be active. Some of the challenges around getting children outside, particularly as we move towards summer... encouraging children to be putting on the hats and the sunscreen and getting outside to enjoy an active lifestyle.

Carole Parker

Yes, absolutely, so it's doing all the right things so that they can play outside. Yeah, that education around sun safety is important.

Also keeping up connections with family and friends. If you're eating at the table or having a celebration, those social activities around food is a great way that children can learn about foods

Also, young babies, you know, breastfeeding is really important and especially in those early years, if you can breast feed up to six months that is really good, you know, and some people can manage to go up to 12 months, which is absolutely brilliant. But I also recognise the fact that sometimes people can't breastfeed, so but it's important to offer them, the new mothers, that opportunity to give their babies the best start that they can.

Caroline Heeris

Why is breastfeeding important?

Carole Parker

Well, it's very nurturing and it's a connection between the mother. But also, as far as food exposure, we eat a variety of foods, so the milk is going to taste different. And so children, as they move from milk to food, it's the different taste there, it's more acceptable and there's a lot of research supporting that. Whereas, if you have a formula food...

So, breast milk is really important, it has so much more nutrition in it than the formula milk, but also it also has protective factors in it for immunity. It is the best option, but like, you can't always, not all mothers can breastfeed and so it's really important to acknowledge that they're doing the best they can. But if you can encourage people to breastfeed, and if they can and they do, it's much better for the child.

Caroline Heeris

OK, so you said you would support mothers to try and breastfeed up to six months and if they could do up to 12 months, that would be wonderful. At what stage would we start looking at introducing solid foods to babies?

Carole Parker

Six months is what's recommended. Some may offer if a child's ready a little bit earlier, but six months is the general rule of thumb, and it's offering iron rich foods first. And offering little tastes because as they get to 8 months their need for iron increases significantly that the breast milk actually, or the formula, can't support so.

Caroline Heeris

OK, so that's those iron fortified cereals?

Carole Parker

Yeah, iron fortified cereals and you can offer like pureed meats, in little bits.

Caroline Heeris

OK.

Carole Parker

My daughter has lots of allergies, so she had this huge sheet and every food she introduced separately. She ticked off if there was no response. She was over, probably, cautious but it's exposing the child to everything because even allergies like peanuts, they're now saying support a little bit earlier on in the piece. It's kind of interesting how times have changed about presenting foods.

Caroline Heeris

So, I understand that there is research out there that says if you offer or introduce a little bit of these foods earlier on in the piece that a child is less likely to develop an allergy to them? Is that there are current thinking?

Carole Parker

Yeah, that's the current thinking.

Supporting things like you fruit, fruit and vegetables is usually acceptable from the child, but things like meats it's less acceptable as they get into the two-year-old, so it's really important to give them a lot of exposure to lots of different types of foods.

Caroline Heeris

Of course, with babies would advocate that they were introduced to family foods. So, whatever the family are having for dinner that that would be chopped or pureed rather than going for the commercial baby food products.

Carole Parker

Of course, because again with seasons, fruit, and vegetables change. And with the way you cook, it often changes, so you're exposing different flavours, whereas a commercial food is the same.

If we want to add child to experience more flavours and get a broader variety of foods, offering exactly what we're eating, and not only that, it's less stress, less preparation. All you got to do is either puree or mash it or cut it into smaller pieces for the different stages of development. However, they're getting the same nutrition that you're getting, which is a good thing. And that role modelling I was talking about is easier to initiate if they're eating the same.

Caroline Heeris

There is a lot of information out there that parents can access at the moment if parents were looking for advice on nutrition for their children. Can you recommend some resources that they might be able to access?

Carole Parker

The Australian Government website which has the Australian dietary guidelines, [Eat for Health](#) and also the Western Australian Government website. You can go to [Nutrition Australia](#), you can go to [Dietitians Australia](#), they have lots of information about families. It's knowing where to access it, you just put in "children" and lots of information comes up.

We have the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, which is our standards, which are all our food has to tick their boxes for it to reach our shelves. So, whether it's in the actual growing of the food from the farmers to the actual production of food, to the storage of food, and the safety of food, we have probably the best standards in the world. So, if you want to go and find out what's happening to our food, that's a good place to go.

There are programs such as [Munch and Move in NSW](#), there's the [Cancer Council](#), [Crunch and Sip](#) there's [Food for kids WA](#) there's a [WA School Canteen Association](#) where they actually have policies around what food is acceptable in the schools, you've got your red, amber, and green.

Caroline Heeris

Ohh, the traffic light system that they use in school canteens.

Carole Parker

Yeah, so that's the star chart that they use them when they're ordering the food, say, don't, well, they've only got green and orange on the star chart! You can't have red.

Yeah, Early Childhood Australia.

Caroline Heeris

But that would be a good ,that would be a good method for families to be using and they were if they were creating a healthy lunch box, could be that resource of the of the traffic light system.

Carole Parker

And also, [Live Lighter](#) have got their lunchbox book, that can be for what you're talking about?

Caroline Heeris

But that that would probably be a very useful resource because, I don't have to make school lunches anymore is my boys are now At UNI but, I know when my children were at school it was always, it could be a bit of a chore to try and come up with a healthy lunch box. So those sorts

of resources that give parents ideas of how to create a healthy lunch box for their child would always be useful.

Carole Parker

And that's really good because it's structured that it has all the different years for kids up to the age of 18 and its pictorial so you can see what about lunch box should look like.

Caroline Heeris

OK, so which resource was that again?

Carole Parker

So, this is the lunch box, it's the Live Lighter, Cancer Council, and WASCA. So, there is a lot of good resources already out there, but of course the government can do more, couldn't they? I mean this promotion of foods, fast foods for kids and making food more accessible for the remote areas I think is really important to having good nutrition.

Caroline Heeris

Well, I guess in the current climate where the cost of living is impacting families and the cost of fruit and vegetables and fresh food is going up across the board, families might need a bit more support to be able to be creative in coming up with cost or budget-wise, mealtimes.

Carole Parker

And that is where I guess, like you said, getting creative, buy in bulk and share with another family or with extended family members so you can buy, buy cheaper in bulk. So, you divide it up. That is one way of meat, fruit, and vegetables, by a big box at the Spudshed for an example, or at the local markets where you can get foods in bulk. Or go to an actual farmer.

Caroline Heeris

Or grow your own.

Carole Parker

Or grow your own is another one, absolutely. But also buying in season is another way which is really important. You get more nutrition because it's straight off the off the plant.

Also you freezer is your best friend when you buy in bulk, pop some in the freezer.

Caroline Heeris

Excellent. There's some really good, really good suggestions. All right. Well, Carole, thank you so much for this morning, our time is coming to an end.

Before we do go though, I've got the five quick questions that we like to finish with, so if you could tell me please the name of the book you most loved as a child?

[long pause]

And you weren't prepared for that, were you?

[Both laugh]

Carole Parker

Enid Blyton books

Caroline Heeris

Enid Blyton!! Okay, being a fellow Enid Blyton, avid reader myself, I know all too well the tales of Amelia Jane, thank you for that. We do the three main building blocks of wellbeing for you personally?

Carole Parker

The building blocks for wellbeing. Good nutrition.

Caroline Heeris

Good nutrition, obviously, that's a given.

Carole Parker

Getting plenty of exercise.

Caroline Heeris

OK.

Carole Parker

And family and friends. Connections are really important.

Caroline Heeris

Can you recall, in a sentence, your happiest childhood memory? What did you like to do when you were a child?

Carole Parker

I love going to the beach.

Caroline Heeris

Going to the beach, OK.

Carole Parker

And I still do.

Caroline Heeris

Excellent. That's great to hear.

So the next question is describe your favourite outdoor space?

Carole Parker

Ah, the beach.

Caroline Heeris

The beach! I see you got two for the price of one there!

Complete this sentence: To help them thrive, children need:

Carole Parker

Plenty of exposure to good nutritious foods

Caroline Heeris

[Laughs]

I somehow thought that was what we're going to say!

Carole Parker, thank you so much for joining me this morning to talk about the importance of good nutrition to the promotion of positive childhoods.

Carole Parker

Thank you, Caroline.