

In A Bite with Charlotte Mei

Season 2 Episode 3 - Thalia E Prum

Full Transcript

Charlotte Mei

If you were to think back on the days at the dinner table as a kid, would you have considered your younger self as a picky eater? I for certain, was one, and I gave my parents such a tough time. I didn't like being said, but I didn't want to be left alone either. And then I went through this phase where all I wanted to eat was cabbage and chicken.

So thankfully, I'm way past those days and today in our episode, we are talking all about that picky eating. Our guest is based out of Australia and her mission is to transform mealtimes from being stressful and anxiety ridden to relaxed, enjoyable and fun the way it should be. She does this specifically for children aged 1 to 10, and her work involves helping parents confidentially and food battles at the dinner table with their little ones and fostering a relationship with all food.

So parents out there, you'd want to listen on. Thalia is also a content creator, a loving mother of two, excluding the seven guide dogs she also helped raise. And our guest for today, in this episode, we speak about how she got into this line of work, what makes a picky eater nature or nurture her approach towards raising healthy and intuitive eaters and so much more.

I hope you enjoy this episode.

Charlotte Mei

So, Thalia, this is such a specific niche that you're in —picky eating. What got you into it?

Thalia E Prum

That's a good question. Well, I kind of sort of segway into it a little bit. I was teaching at a community college when I was over in the US, and when I had my second baby, I was diagnosed with postpartum depression and anxiety and I had very much lost who I was.

So I thought, I'm going to kind of go on Instagram and see if I can. Like, my page originally just started as I would share, like feeding tips and plates for my toddler. And that kind of boosted me into like quite a good following. And the more I opened question boxes for people, the more picky eating became...it was very abundant that a lot of parents struggle with that.

So I decided, I'm going to talk more about this than I'm going to share suggestions and ideas for people. And it ended up becoming very, very popular. And I created an online course which I've since, I've got three now. And during COVID, actually right before COVID, I quit my teaching job, actually, it was during COVID —I quit my teaching job because I was really enjoying what I was doing and I started doing coaching, which I never thought I'd be able to do.

But my... he's no longer my husband, but my husband at the time was laid off from work and he was home, so he was willing to look after the kids. While I counselled clients for a few hours a week and I never thought I'd be doing that. And it just kind of grew from there and it's been wonderful.

It's... I've definitely found my calling in life, which is really nice.

Charlotte Mei

Awww amazing. What a good feeling that is, isn't it?

Thalia E Prum

A day with clients like I'll usually be tired by the end of it, but it's extremely rewarding to, when you see the other people on the screen and their face has just gone 'Oh I never would have thought of that' or 'I'm actually excited to try this!'

When they were originally like dreading having mealtimes with their kids and they're like, yeah, 'I'm excited to try that!'

It's very fulfilling and it's definitely the last few years have been turbulent in my own personal life, and continuing to do this work has kept me very grounded and it definitely provides me a lot of fulfilment and enjoyment and happiness.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, that's wonderful. You know, very similarly to you, I never saw myself on social media. But look, we're both here. You've got thousands of followers on both TikTok and Instagram. How did that start for you? Just getting on social media in front of the camera. Did that come naturally to you?

Thalia E Prum

Well, as somebody who was lecturing students that were like in their early twenties or even late teens, I was very much somebody who wanted to connect with students in a way that was not lecturing, traditionally lecturing.

And once I got over my fear of public speaking, which you kind of had to do pretty quickly when you're teaching. Once I kind of got over that, the classroom became very dynamic, and it was almost like a performance that you were giving to students, so they would be interested and engaged and would participate. They're used to sitting in these classrooms where they just sit there and attempt to absorb information.

And so the education part of it came quite naturally to me. And I actually originally took an online course about how to work social media. And it was through taking that course. It was a... I guess it was a business and social media course —how to use social media for business. And it was while working through that course that I felt like I'm actually exercising part of my brain that I haven't used.

And I was also only about five months postpartum with my second child, and I was not in a good mental headspace. And the more I was like writing down all these different things about who I wanted to help and serve, it just like lit me up from the inside. So whenever I did go on the

camera...looking back at some of my earlier videos they're definitely quite... 'wooden' in comparison to how they are now. But I never felt it to be like awkward because I'm an excellent talker as you are finding out.

Charlotte Mei

Absolutely. Thalia. Oh I'm loving this. So now, going back to picky eating, I've got a personal question for you. Were you a picky eater growing up?

Thalia E Prum

According to my mum, I grazed a lot in growing up and I was never really all that hungry, like I was hungry and I would just kind of graze all day, which is not what I suggest parents do.

So looking back, I'm like, Okay. But no, I wasn't. I wasn't especially picky. From what I've been told.

Charlotte Mei

Oh that's good. That's really...your parents must be so happy with that, because I definitely gave my parents a hard time.

Thalia E Prum

Really?

Charlotte Mei

And so I wanted...Yeah, I, I, you know, I was so indecisive. Whenever they fed me, I would just flick the spoon away because I wanted to eat on my own.

And so my mom would walk away and I would scream and shout because I didn't want to be left alone.

And I ate so slowly that everyone would just leave the dining table and I would be there alone. Obviously, the adults were hoping that that would mean I would speed up, but that never happened. Anyway, till today, I'm still a slow eater.

You mentioned that refusal is pretty common with picky eaters. Are there any other common patterns that you see and how does that evolve over the ages?

Thalia E Prum

There are a lot of patterns and typically, whereas this is not the case for all picky eaters, I have some parents that will approach me and say 'my kid's ate and they only became picky at five'.

That's more unusual. Typically what I hear from parents is 'my kid ate everything up till when they were 12 months old, 14 months old, 16 months old, 18 months old.' Somewhere around that time where kids start to develop autonomy and start saying no to things. And that's the point. That's the tipping point. It does sometimes come with refusal where the child will just say, 'I'm not eating that' or just say 'no'.

And the tipping point there is that the parent feels it's their job to make the child eat. So the parent will usually do one of a couple of things —they'll either force the child to eat. Which I don't recommend,

They will make something else for the child and they'll say, 'oh you don't want peanut butter on toast today? Well, I'll make you eggs on toast instead.' That I don't recommend you do that either.

Or you just leave it there and say, 'Well, eat it or starve' —which most parents don't do. I also still don't recommend you do that. If it's a combination of different things that you need to do. But that's the typical thing that I see where it starts.

And to identify it, like the two questions that I ask parents whenever we're talking in a DM or on the phone —how long has it been going on is the first question. And if it's been going on, because everybody says, it's a phase, they'll grow out of it and *la da da*. It's just not accurate for most kids because we can perpetuate the problem in the way we respond to it. So that can make it worse.

So if you're thinking about an actual phase, 'Oh I don't feel like cleaning the toilet today'. Okay. How long is that going to go on for? A couple of days or maybe a week? If it goes on for like a month, you're going to have mould growing in the toilet or algae or something gross.

So in the same way that a phase like it might be that your child's like, I would say 'peanut buttered out for a couple of days'. I would say 'okay, for a couple of days.' But if your child is like, never wanting to eat peanut butter for like months and it's something that they used to eat all the time, that's a red flag.

And the other question is —your child eating a variety of foods from all the food groups? If your child eats two fruits out of 100? Not a variety. If they eat one type of meat and nothing else in the meat and meat alternative food group? Not a variety. If they're not eating fruits and vegetables, that's two food groups that they're not eating from, that's a red flag.

So it's not just...because the typical thing that we'll say is that if you child is eating under 20 foods, that's a red flag. And it is definitely. And also, how much variety is there across food groups? How many food groups have been eliminated? That's to me, something that's very important in the screening process

And to think if...there was a mum I was talking to on a live stream that I did the other day. She said her child was two and a half and that they were eating really well, they started solids around like five or six months old and they were eating well for a year and then they've been picky since 18 months old. That's 50% of their eating life.

So think of it in that way as well. Like what percentage of their life that they've been eating solid food, have they been picky for?

Charlotte Mei

And so you mentioned something really interesting just now. If a kid, you know um liked peanut butter for, let's say, their first, you know, 24 months and then started to refuse it, why would that be an issue?

Thalia E Prum

If the child refuses it?

Charlotte Mei

Mmhmm

Thalia E Prum

From a nutritional standpoint or a picky eating standpoint?

Charlotte Mei

From a picky eating standpoint

Thalia E Prum

Okay. Um, it's not a problem if the child again, if it's for a day or so, like let's say you've eaten peanut butter every day for the last two weeks and your child tells you, I don't want peanut butter today, it's okay for them to not want it for a day in the same way that if we ate the same thing every day, we're going to be a bit sick of it.

If that persists for multiple days and weeks, then that's a problem. And I would want to address that. Because the extreme example is, again, this was maybe a year ago on a live that someone said, 'my child is now only wanting to drink milk.' And I'm like, 'How long?' And she told me that's been going on for two weeks.

That is beyond the red flag. And that's like, that's an extreme example of how a child's eating shifts dramatically.

But what usually happens, it's not that your child who eats everything decides that they only want to drink milk for two weeks like that. Because that's like an extreme example. But if your child's, a kid who's happily eats peanut butter all the time, and then you've noticed for three weeks they've refused peanut butter, like that's quite a big change.

So you want to keep your eyes peeled for any major changes like that. They usually tend to creep in more slowly, though. It's like the frog in hot water. If you throw it into the boiling pot, it jumps out. But if you put it in cold and then turn it up slowly, it stays there for longer and longer.

And that's kind of what happens. It's one food here and there and then we don't really notice that. And then all of a sudden it's a year later and they don't eat ten things and we're like 'how did we get here?'

Charlotte Mei

So nutrition aside, are there any like more deeper rooted issues around picky eating that parents should be mindful about?

Thalia E Prum

Neurodivergence is a big one and that I wouldn't even classify as like *traditional picky eating*.

Like in the literature. They use picky eating and they use selective eating. And selective eating is more If you've got a child who is neurodivergent and they have a very strong preference for crunchy foods.

And in the last year or so, the number of parents that I've worked with in my one on one practice that have kids that have autism and or ADHD has increased a lot.

So this is something that I'm learning a lot about and I'm doing a lot of continuing education to make sure I'm up to date and can help these parents to really understand why this occurs and how we can still branch out.

And see that's the thing, whether or not you have a diagnosis and I tell this to parents, cause a lot of times I get kids, I get parents of kids who don't have a diagnosis because that tends to happen around five or six.

And some of these parents have kids that are like four or three. And they the way they describe to me, like the child literally just won't eat. They won't even say, 'I want to eat something else'. Whereas a neurotypical child will skip a meal —'I don't want to eat that'. And then 10 seconds later want a snack.

With a neurodivergent child —not all, but many, will just be happy to go for 7 or 8 hours without eating. That's not normal typical behavior. That's a red flag potentially for Neurodivergence.

And it's not an entirely different cattle of fish. The strategies that I use with neurotypical kids and neurodiverse kids are not hugely different. It's just the way you go about implementing them is different because they process the world differently.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah. oh that's so important to know. Yeah, for sure. And so when it comes to picky eating, say if a child doesn't grow out of it, so to speak, or doesn't get, you know, nurtured out of it, what does that look like in adulthood? Obviously, you know, overall health aside, what would that manifest as in adulthood?

Thalia E Prum

I mean, it really depends.

There are a lot of parents who have commented on posts of mine that will say 'I was a picky eater till I was 17 or 15, and then I just grew out of it.' So some of it is that they do grow out of it.

But I want to just sidetrack for a second. It's not really a tangent, but I just kind of want to go back to the whole... 'Well, they do grow out of it'.

I don't want you to sit there at home thinking my child will grow out of it in 15 years. Because if you're thinking that your child is missing out on adequate nutrition during that ten years where they're not eating. So not only is it stressful for you, it's also stressful for your child *and* they're missing out on adequate nutrition.

Like I've had parents say, 'I only ate chicken nuggets from the ages of like 5 to 12.' That's not nutritionally beneficial for a child. So if you're sitting there thinking, 'Oh see, they do grow out of it.' No, don't think that way, please.

So some parents have said that they grow out of it as a teenager and others simply don't. Because a lot of them, not a lot, but some of the parents that I work with will tell me that they also are picky eaters.

So a lot of times the strategies that we're using to help them with their kid, they're like, 'Oh I should do that for myself.' And it actually does work.

Because I've had the feedback from parents, like when one of the parents in my group from a couple of months ago. One of their homework assignments was to try something that they don't typically like. And the husband tried cauliflower and we had brainstormed a way for him.. for them to cook it together. And that's like a thing that he now eats happily.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, there you go.

Thalia E Prum

So it's never too late to change. So if you're listening to this and you have a kid who's like 10. Adults figure, look, not figure it out, but adults are capable of liking new things too, so it's not too late for your 10 or 12 year old to do it as well.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, it's so interesting because when I speak to most of my friends about foods that they didn't like as a kid that they now do, there tends to be common ones like —ladyfingers or okra and eggplant. And I wonder if this has to do more with the texture of foods?

Thalia E Prum

It definitely can for some people because, I mean, if you're the parent, well, you're not going to be the child listening.

But when you're the parent listening to this, make a list either mentally or write down some of the foods that you choose not to go out and buy for yourself because they're not your favourite. Do they have anything in common like texturally? Because they might and other times they may not. And it's

true like but but also this was a discussion that we were having on TikTok recently with someone commented on a video where I prepared tofu for my children, saying, 'You clearly don't work with picky eaters because no picky eater eats tofu.'

And I was like, 'Excuse me? There are plenty of picky eaters that eat tofu and there are some picky eaters that don't eat chicken nuggets.' So there's no like mold that every picky eater has. And I didn't realise until reading that comment how misguided some people's thoughts on picky eating is, that if you're if your child eats chicken nuggets, they must be a picky eater. But that's not true.

There are children that are picky eaters that eat broccoli, but they really struggle with other things. And a lot of times it does have to do with texture.

So I wanted to come back to the question of what does it look like in adulthood?

There was a client that I worked with who was actually an adult. He was in his mid-twenties and he had been brought up with the very traditional 'You need to eat your plate, you can't leave the table until you finish eating.' Which is not unusual for people in our age group to have been brought up that way. And he was working through a lot of shame that he felt and he was a very restricted eater as an adult.

And he had gotten to the point where he was like 'I want to expand my food list. I just don't know how.' And again, he's an extreme case. The majority of us are able to go throughout our lives and be, you know, be okay with the variety that we've got. Excuse me, at the same time, it's a lot of the time working through our own emotional barriers, potentially, that came from childhood with us, that we feel shame around not eating a certain food.

So we just never want to try it again.

Charlotte Mei

So I wanted to ask what role does psychological safety at home play in picky eating or, you know, the way one goes about eating at the dinner table?

Thalia E Prum

It's more than you might think. There was a client that I worked with that and this is true for many clients, but this one in particular was quite an extreme example.

So I hope nobody is triggered when they're listening to this.

These parents, they were at their wit's end in terms of frustration and they were using...they were yelling, they were using punishments, and they were putting the child in a different room with the door shut when she wouldn't eat.

And that's out of parental frustration of, they were so desperate, which most parents are, they're so desperate for their child to eat healthy, nutritious foods that when their child doesn't or can't, which may be the case for some picky eaters, particularly neurodivergent children or children that have

avoidant restrictive food intake disorder or ARFID, where they cannot eat those foods because there is so much fear and anxiety for them that they legitimately cannot eat it.

So the environment that the parent provides at home psychologically is very important because if you're sitting there pressuring your child to eat, you need to eat this, you need to eat your broccoli. You're not going to grow up big and strong. That can have psychological effects on your child.

Are they thinking, I'm not going to grow up big and strong if I don't eat that like that? If someone told you that as an adult, you at least...we have an adult brain that can process 'Well, that's not true', 'I know I can survive' and other things. But your child doesn't have the capability of thinking that and they might legitimately think that they could die if they don't eat this broccoli, which they physically feel like they cannot eat.

So providing a safe environment for the child to want to try things is really important. And it's a big part of when I'm working with a parent it's all about being... I'm a gentle and respectful parent with *my own* children. And parenting around mealtimes, it's really important to bring those respectful component into feeding because your relationship with your child is more important always than whether or not they try a bond of broccoli.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, that's such a good point. Going back to what you said about, about you know, the things parents say to kids about what they eat or not eat. Growing up, I took my parents word as gospel and I wanted to be, you know, strong, healthy and tall. And so I would eat anything and everything that they told me was 'good for me'.

And then in teenage hood, I started questioning all these things, 'Oh well, why is wholemeal bread actually better for me?' And funny enough, that's exactly why I studied nutrition in university, because I told myself I couldn't find the answers anywhere. Or, you know, you would read one magazine article, it says one thing, the newspaper article says another thing.

And once and for all, I wanted to find out for myself. And, you know, I think parents sometimes and I really don't blame them. You know, we don't understand the effect of what we're saying

Thalia E Prum

100%

Charlotte Mei

...could happen to our kids in the long run as well.

Thalia E Prum

It's a hard thing to talk to parents about, especially on social media, where if someone's seeing your post in that, it might come across slightly out of context where if someone's been following you for a while, they already know that you would never...like for me... I'm never okay with starving a child. That's not...'starve it out' is not a thing that exists in the world for me.

And you know someone might see...where if they're not familiar with that and you say like, 'it's important to have your kid on a schedule.' Like, I should not have been grazing all day as a child.

Some parents get all up in arms about that. 'You are starving your child.' 'This is stupid.' 'I don't know, like, 'How dare you...I shouldn't, my child says that they're hungry, how can you say I shouldn't feed them'.

When you get to the point of like when I'm on the phone with somebody, they've followed me for long enough that they understand the general premise of behind...the method to the madness of how you get to help the child.

And when you ask them a hard question like 'what is the reason you feel you need to say to your child —*please eat three more bites?*' It's much less confronting when, when the person already knows a little bit about what you do and how you do it, versus if I was to put that out on a post. I think it would get a lot of hate comments because it seems like it's attacking the parent and it's shaming the parent and it's not about doing that.

And it's very much I want...me...maybe I'm too blunt. But I, I want you to examine as a parent, why do you feel like you have to say that? And almost always it comes from a place of fear, that I am afraid my child won't eat it if I don't say that. And why are we afraid of that? Because we care about our kids so much.

It's not that you've done something wrong, that you love your child so much and you don't know what else to say, So you go about it in the way of pressuring them. Which will in the end make you more frustrated, and make them more fearful or resistant to dig their feet in.

It would be like the example that I give my clients is 'what if I put a plate of slugs in front of you and asked you to eat it?' Would you eat it? Probably not.

And what if I told you 'They're delicious! You would love them! Charlotte, eat them...like you've just...just try one. You'll love it, like it explodes in your mouth and all the squishy juice comes out and it's just so yummy!'

I could tell you that, but that's going to make you even more suspicious. The more I try to spell it to you, like the car salesman. 'This is a great car for you.' 'You'll love this.' 'You just need to drive it. You just give it a chance.' 'You'll love it. Just try it.' A child is not looking at this through an adult's brain.

A child is just seeing —my parent wants me to do something so badly and they won't leave me alone. This clearly means a lot to them and that gives the child a lot of power. Which they don't know what to do with. And that makes us, it puts us in a worse position in terms of we're not going to be able to help our child try something.

If you're in the mindset of 'I need to get my child to do this', you're already failing. Like you're already not going to get where you want to be, because you're trying to work against your child when you need to work together.

Charlotte Mei

And so what's the approach to do that instead of telling, you know, getting your child to eat something? How do you reframe that for parents?

Thalia E Prum

Which is wonderful and a complex question. How long have we got enough?

Charlotte Mei

Fair enough

Thalia E Prum

Look, what I want to describe is the method that I use. I've recently given it a name. It's '*connected mealtimes method*'. And with that, if you can envision in your mind three circles, a small circle and then a bigger circle around that, and then a bigger circle around that, you've got a small circle in the middle, which is your actual meal time when you're at the table.

And that's usually where a lot of parents will tell their child, 'Try this broccoli, it's delicious! It's so yummy, eat it with this, it's so delicious. It'll help you grow.'

And then the next circle out is like the circle that you can use for preparation. When you're preparing the meal, when you're shopping for the food, you can talk about the food like, 'Oh let's buy some chicken thighs.' 'That's what a chicken thigh looks like. Can you please go and pick them?' or 'I need seven apples, please go and pick me seven apples.' Where they're having these exposures outside of meal times.

And this is again, where communication is so important. And I think a lot of parents only see the mealtime —that middle circle is like, I have to do everything in that circle. But in reality, if you're not utilising that bigger circle —'*prep time*' and the last circle is just '*any time*' to talk about it.

Like there are times where, like I'll because I'm separated, I'll pick up my kids from hand over and it's 3:00 in the afternoon on a Saturday. And I will, once they've sort of settled down and, you know, they've told me everything they need to tell me, I might tell them what we're having for dinner, even though dinner's not for a few hours.

And that has nothing to do with '*prep time*' that has nothing to do with the *meal time* itself, but it's to start having a conversation with them about —how do they feel about this dinner? Is there going to be a lot of resistance? Do we need to talk about it more? Do we need to work through this? Do we need to put a plan into place?

And this looks a little different depending on how old the child is at the moment. My small coaching group's got a couple of kids that are just 2 years old and I've got a couple that are 7 and 8 years old. So the way you communicate is different and the different ages. But if you're only focused on the mealtime and you're not using the connection of the two bigger circles and communicating, at other times, you're just missing out on a lot of opportunities.

So the roundabout way of answering your question —what can parents say instead? If you're already doing that, that's *damage control*. We need to like pull the lens out, like zoom away and look at what can we do elsewhere during the day to communicate and to expose the child. So if you're doing *damage control* and you're at the meal and you've put the broccoli in front of your child and they've said, 'ew, no gross, I don't want that'.

The easiest thing to say is to let them know that they don't have to eat it. There's no pressure for them to eat it. And then again, with the slugs, if I told you you didn't have to eat it, you probably feel a huge wave of relief like, and if this is your child, they might think that you might not love them if they don't eat the broccoli.

You, as an adult know that we're friends and we're out to dinner, or you've come over to my house and I've given you slugs, you'll know that we're still friends. You have an adult brain and you can...you know that. But your child doesn't know that.

So giving them permission to not eat something. And then the other part of it is, which is a big part of what I do with clients as well, where we'll act out silly scenarios is injecting fun and enjoyment into the mealtime, to make them less rigid and less stressful and less frustrating for everybody.

And that's a really good way to break down some of the barriers to connect with the child, to help them engage with the food.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, that's such good advice. I really like that '*connected mealtime method*'. And you know, it's such a good point as well, you mentioned about getting kids involved. Because there is so much research on this, you know, getting kids to shop with you at the supermarket, make decisions, you know, prepare the food together.

I mean, could you share more about you know, the effects of getting a child involved.

Thalia E Prum

For starters, well, there are so many things. And really, when I look at this, I, I look at this through, yeah, I'm here to help you with your meal times. But also when there's something when there's something bigger at play like this is going to help your child in the long term.

Like this is going to help them as they grow up. Like this is important. There's a lot of things. So when you're taking your child to the supermarket, please don't give them a phone to look at. Have them look at, have them predict something even if they're 2 years old. 'Do you remember where the

apples are?' 'Where is the fresh fruit section?' Fresh fruit section. 'Do you remember which aisle the pasta's in?'

Get them involved in just the basic shopping so that they know the anatomy of the shops that they're going to. All right. 'How many apples?' And like for numbers and things —if your child's 5, 'how much are the apples this week per kilo or per pound', whatever it is where you are, have them weigh the numbers with you.

So, yeah, I mean, that's not specifically going to help you with food, but they're still having an exposure because the sign is right next to the apples. And you can, you can say that and you can count into the bag...'I need six apples. Can you count them?' 'What can you do? Do you know how to pick a firm apple?' Like show them how to do that.

So the point is, if you're involving them in the prep, whether it's the store, like going to the grocery store or them helping you at home, they're learning all the parts about life that are important. Like you need to know how to pick an apple. You need to know how to...when they're older, you need to know how to cut something. You need to know how to stir something. You need to know how to measure something.

These are important life skills that go beyond nutrition, but they also do help you with exposures. They give the child *ownership*. 'I'm helping mum in the kitchen.' 'I am helping make the family's meal.' 'Today I'm making my own sandwich for myself.'

So it goes beyond just exposures. Although exposures are extremely important. It gives the child a sense of meaning and belonging in the family dynamic and in their life, which means they are more likely to try the dish at the table. Now, for those of you listening, and say 'I gave my child...my child helps in the kitchen all the time and they'll touch the food, but they refuse to eat it'. Remember that you are like already winning because your child is having these positive exposures, which is really, really essential.

And then I want you to think about what changes in the kitchen to when you're at the table and why is it that you think your child will happily make it but not eat it? There might still be pressure from from the parent or expectation at the table that the child tries something which can make them more resistant.

So if you're the parent who's thinking that, think about does anything change between being in the kitchen and being at the table that might make the child not want it?

Charlotte Mei

Those are such, such good points. And I really like the activities that you suggested at the supermarket. Look, I'm not a parent yet, but I'm taking notes for the future.

I love that. I wouldn't have thought of that, You know, asking a kid to pick out 5 apples or teaching them how to pick out a good fruit. I mean, I have so many peers my age who still don't know how to buy, y'know, fish or vegetables, etc..

Um I've got a question now, and this is a commonly heard concern that parents have —hiding vegetables in different types of recipes. Yes or no? Does that work?

Thalia E Prum

What's the goal? You asked me if it works. What's the goal?

Charlotte Mei

To get them to eat their veg.

Thalia E Prum

Okay, so I'll play devil's advocate for a minute. You make the...it's usually a pasta sauce or like a muffin where you've hidden the vegetables. If you're measuring your success by your child, ingesting the food. Yes. Most of the time it works.

I don't measure it by that yardstick because I want my children when they're teenagers, if they go out for a meal or they move out of home at some point, which they're going to do as a functioning, hopefully functioning adult. They're going to be able to go and choose to buy their own food at the supermarket.

So yeah, like knowing how to navigate the supermarket without being on a phone, very important. So we want.. I want my long term goal and I'm all about long term goals, they're slower to get to but it's the long term goal you want. You want your child to be a teenager who says, 'I'm going to make sure I have a salad tonight, that I'm making dinner. I'm going to make sure I've got some vegetables here. I'm not just going to sit down and eat 60 chicken nuggets because that will fill me up. 'That's the long term goal.

So if your child eats chicken nuggets or veggie filled muffins or a sauce that has veggies in it, but they don't know the veggies are in there, one, they don't know that they actually like the veggies.

And two, they'll never be exposed to them as veggies. So they never understand the importance of needing to eat them or how to even make them. There's so much, um a mum told me, 'Oh I have these meatballs that I hide broccoli and my child hates broccoli, but he loves these meatballs.' And my response...I didn't quite say it like this, but the response in my head was, 'Well, how dumb is that? You're missing this amazing opportunity to show your child that they like that like broccoli.' How great is that? That they like broccoli in this way. And we're missing the opportunity for them to know that.

So my yardstick of measuring is not to hide it, that the kid needs to know it's there. And then I have parents who say, 'well, my kid makes the sauce with me and he sees me put the zucchini and the tomato and this and that, and that. Is it still hiding it?'

No, because they know it's in there. The goal is that they know it's there. They know what they're eating.

Charlotte Mei

I love that. It's about redefining success as well. When you ask the question, y'know, 'is it successful? when you get your child to eat the vegetables that were hidden in this soup?' The answer is no

Thalia E Prum

in the short term...

Charlotte Mei

And at the end of the day, yeah.

Now the next one and I'm sure you get this question all the time, screens at the dining table...how do you navigate that?

Thalia E Prum

Do yourself a favour and never start having them at the table. That's the easiest thing I will say. I've worked with a lot of like in the last group that I had every single parent on their intake form, I asked about screens or any sort of distractions. And every single one of them had screens on at multiple meals in the day.

So that was what we worked on in week one. And by week three, pretty much everybody was screen free at most meals, which was great and the kids were okay with it. And so when I say we're removing screens, it's not again, remember, like with the '*connected mealtime method*' is a beautiful thing because it's connected in that the meals are connected to other parts of the day, but also we're connected to our child and it's about doing things respectfully.

So I've helped parents remove their child from a baby bottle when they're 3 years old or 4 years old. And it's not about just doing it cold turkey and having the kid be traumatised by it. It's about doing it in a way where we're working together with the child because that's how you're going to get there, not by tricking them.

And that's the other thing with hiding vegetables. Imagine...imagine if I pureed slugs into your favourite food and then told you afterwards that you ate slugs. And I knew full well that you didn't want to eat slugs. You would not trust me again.

And again, you're an adult and I'm an adult. We're on the same playing field, but when it's the parent and a child. They don't have the same...first of all they don't have the same understanding of what's going on, because they have an immature brain and they also will never trust me again. So it's just just don't do it. It's not, it's not worth it. What you're going to lose from the trust between you and your child.

There was a lady that I worked with who her cultural background was that they did sit down and like she grew up this way and she's always done it this way. And she was very resistant to removing the screen because she was like, culturally, it was embedded in her. And also she, like her and her husband, have very they work full time and they had very busy lives and jobs.

And she was like, 'I'm so tired. By the end of the day, I don't want to talk to my kid. I just want to sit down and watch something on my phone. And we'd all just watch our own thing and we just sit and eat.'

She was quite resistant to changing that, and we work slowly on it because she has to be willing in the same way your child has to be willing to partake in what's going on with the vegetables.

You've got to be willing to partake in making some changes to. And it took about a month. And then after they were fully off their devices at mealtimes, she was...it took time. It didn't just like snap fingers and change because it takes a get long term goal. She was enjoying meal times more and her son, she could see that her son was so much more engaged with them and enjoying mealtimes.

And that in turn helped him want to explore his food more and made him so much more open to trying things like he ended up like surprising them one day and like ate mushrooms, and she couldn't believe it.

And that that comes from being present with the child while you're eating. So another thing similar to the screen is if you just dump your child at the table and you're not eating with them, you're losing a lot of opportunities to model to them.

How do you sit at the table? Are you slouching on the side of the chair? Are you throwing food across the room? Are you dropping stuff on the floor? Like are you leaning over the plate? How are you eating? How are you...like you need to model this. And imagine what you said earlier, Charlotte, about when you were a child and everybody abandoned you at the table.

That didn't feel good.

Charlotte Mei

No, it's terrible.

Thalia E Prum

It's not nice to be the only person sitting and eating. So sitting and eating with your child. And I mean that in the sense of physically sitting and eating with them, but also mentally being there when they're on a screen, you're not mentally there with each other, they're off somewhere else. They like they're in their own world. They literally oftentimes don't even hear you.

Charlotte Mei

Yup. Yeah.

Thalia E Prum

So I'm a big...that I'm reasonably dogmatic in that, that there shouldn't be a screen at the table. Because you just you just you're shooting yourself in the foot because you're missing so many opportunities.

Charlotte Mei

I agree. You know, like I said, I'm not, I'm not yet a parent, but I can imagine, you know, and I hear this all the time how tiring it can get. There is a lot on your plate, pun intended.

And you are modelling 24 seven. So with that...

Thalia E Prum

You are....

Charlotte Mei

I can empathise how tiring it can be. If you have a bad day, you still got to be a good model to your kid. In fact, like you said, that could be an opportunity to teach them how to deal with a bad day.

Thalia E Prum

That's exactly the thing. And I don't, I hope no one listening to this is thinking, 'Oh y'know, I'm such a bad mom because I've been doing that'. And I don't want you to think that, you know, we all do things that we have to do to survive a busy day or a hard day.

I have some of my best friends as they were solo parenting for a time. Both these friends, they were flying solo like solo parenting. And one of them, one of them was working, and the other one that wasn't working was studying, and they both have high needs kids with...they're Neurodivergent.

So there's definitely a time and a place to use a screen, and screens can make you a better parent because it gives you the break that you need. What I'm saying is utilizing screens at certain times of the day can be very, very beneficial at meal times is one of the times where I wouldn't recommend it because it gives you the opportunity to model so many things.

If you've had a hard day and you don't feel like talking, it is okay to say that to your child. It is okay to not be the parent who's been putting on a show for their child at dinnertime about how great this broccoli is.

Like I'll tell my clients this if you don't feel like you can commit to doing that at that, at that meal time, don't do it because it's not going to feel authentic for you or for them, and it's not going to be like it's okay to have an easy meal where you you don't talk to each other.

You just like sit there and you just like, talk a little bit and then you just say, 'Look, I just want to sit in quiet for a few minutes.' It's okay that that's communicating and modelling and your children are learning a little bit of empathy and you're explaining maybe what made the day hard for you. So you're processing your own feelings.

All of those things are so important for kids. It's um... I have to be careful about how I say this. Oftentimes, screens can very easily be used when your child is having big emotions to help them get through their emotions, but it's not actually helping them process what's going on. It's just numbing them to what's going on.

So even though we might not feel like we're going to be good at showing up as a parent at dinnertime or at any time in the day because you're so tired, that's like the best teaching moment where you don't have to be perfect all the time and your kid will connect with your authenticity there and they'll see, 'Wow, Mom's tired.'

And you can say like, 'I'm not my usual jokey self today. I just need to get your toothbrush', 'I don't have any energy today, but I'm more than happy for you to sing a song. I just can't sing it for you today.'

So that's..I'll get off my soapbox. But it's okay to not like...

Charlotte Mei

No, I love that. And you know, even having these scripts on hand is so important for parents, especially on days where you just feel like, you know, you're on your knees and you don't really know how to communicate with your child.

Um, you know, Thalia, you've brought up so many good points. I've got like a sheet full of notes now. You know, I really loved what you said about communicating with your child, respecting your child, exposing them to food beyond the dinner table, and, of course, focusing on long term goals. Right. Rather than the short term ones. So I now just want to shift gears a little bit.

I want to ask you some personal questions because I'm so curious about your personal life as well. You do so much and I want to know how do you, you know, balance all of this? I mean, or, yeah, how do you balance all of this —your career as a dietitian, as a content creator, as a mother of two and apparently 7 guide dogs as well? How did that all happen and how does that happen?

Thalia E Prum

Well, the seven guide dogs were not all at once. That was over a process of many, many years...

Charlotte Mei

...Amazing work.

Thalia E Prum

...It was actually wonderful. I was talking to a client earlier today about this because it was at the time my husband and I, we were living in Melbourne, but we knew that that wasn't our long term place to live and we wanted a dog and we thought, you know what, this is perfect because it's like low commitment.

We're not committing to a dog for 15 years, we're committing to a dog for a year. And we just, I don't want to say became addicted to it, but it was such a beautiful thing to do. And the dog came to uni with me and went to lectures with me when I was back studying, in my doing my bachelor's degree.

So that's how we that's how and why we got into that. And it became just a wonderful thing that we did. And so that's where the 7 Guide Dogs came into play. And I kind of want to tie this into what you

said at the end of the summary of what we talked about, about, you know, being respectful with our child.

We also need to be respectful with ourselves and setting our own boundaries. When you tell your child, 'I'm too tired to play that game with the broccoli tonight', that's okay.

And, you know, I tell every parent who hears this will know what I'm talking about. You've literally just sat down and your child gives you their cup. And says 'give me more water' or 'I've already finished my potatoes, I need more.'

So it's okay to say 'I will get you more potatoes'. Or if you've got an older child, 'feel free to go get your own potatoes' or 'I will fill your water up, give me a second. I need to have a few bites of my food', like no one's dying of thirst and starvation by waiting a minute or 2 minutes.

If you've got an older child, they can wait 2 or 3 minutes. It'll be okay. So remember to respect yourself as well. So with that, what you are asking me about my personal life. At the moment, I have 50-50 custody of my children, so I'm in a very different position than I was 3 or 4 years ago, where I was, like probably a lot of parents that are listening to this —the primary carer.

I was also working or at this point had this business on the side. There was a lot of self-sacrificing because you like, I love the work that I do and I...it's very important to me and I love doing it and I love showing my kids that I do it and I love that they get to see how much I love doing it and lot like now that they're a little bit older, they're 5 and 7.

They, you know, they ask me what I do and I say, 'I'm a food doctor', 'I help parents with food and I know about food. That's what I do'. And I like that they get to see that. So how do I balance it all?

Being a content creator is really draining at times, which you would know. How long have you been creating content?

Charlotte Mei

About 4 years now, seriously

Thalia E Prum

Okay. I started...it's coming up on 5 years for me.

Charlotte Mei

Wow

Thalia E Prum

It's a lot. There haven't been many times where I've taken proper time off because social media it's that machine that you're posting 5 days a week, which is what I was doing...sometimes 6 days a week. And then you're in your stories pretty much every day.

And I rarely miss a day like there have been times where I've taken a week off from posts, but I still show up in in stories, which I really enjoy that. I do.

I love showing up and being like, that's just who I am. If the person I am on social media is the person I am in real life, I don't show pictures of my kids, but I show pictures of, you know, if they're helping me, they might be a hand there or, you know, I share lots of food, pictures and stuff.

So, you know, I like sharing all that. There is a point where it's tiring and it's exhausting. And I took a week off totally like an actual full week off earlier this year...

Charlotte Mei

Oh wow good job.

Thalia E Prum

It was great. It was I can't even say I missed social media, so I didn't. I'm really very rarely like if I go on Facebook, it's usually like for the groups that are around my area of like mums of, you know, where I live and that's pretty much all I do on there personally.

Everything else is for work and I'm quite happy to not be on there, when necessary. And so balancing the kids, it looks very different now than what it did when I was still in this marriage. And as a result of that, I, I have a lot of guilt around that. I signed up as a parent to be there all the time. And 50-50 was quite crushing to me.

Yeah, this is getting very personal, but that like that was crushing to me because that was my job. I was the parent all the time and I was the one up at night every night, multiple times a night. Like it was my job. 24/7 and till now...

Like my office used to be in the middle of the house without doors. So when I was quote on quote working, the kids were still like coming to me. And I was, you know, still be, this kid needs a nappy change. I'll go do that.

And now when it's when I don't have them, I like don't have them in the house at all.

So like, my time is 100% mine in that period, which is it's taken a lot of getting used to and I still have a lot of guilt around it and it's hard.

And at the same time I try to maximise the amount of work I do on those days so that when I do have the kids, I am able to be as focused on them as possible

Charlotte Mei

For sure. Yeah. I mean, you know, becoming a mother really changes your identity and your purpose. And I can imagine that was a big shift for you, you know, going from one to the other.

But it's great that, you know, you like what you said, you maximise the time that you have when they're not around and you double down on your work and then you double down when you're with them.

And I also really enjoy the way you create some of your content. I think there was one video where you just plonked the camera at one side of the room and you were hanging laundry.

And I was like 'great, look! That's one video. She killed two birds with one stone.'

Thalia E Prum

You know what, I actually started doing some of those videos more recently. Also, if I'm in the kitchen and this is usually on a day that I either have the kids at school when they're with me, but they're at school, or it's a day that I do not have the kids with me and I'm preparing for them to come back where I'm like, 'Okay, I've eaten up all the food that I cooked while they were here. And now they're gone and now I need to prepare food for when they come back.' So I just set the camera up there while I'm like chopping onions.

There's a video that I did where I've done a voiceover about...I'm talking about making snacks. And someone commented 'here I was thinking you were actually doing something with onions.'

You've got to...you have to get creative because like a lot of my videos are talking videos where I'm just talking at the talking to the camera and I try to mix it up a bit, but that's where the content creation is so tiring, because even when I'm doing a mundane task like hanging the washing... in my head, I'm like, 'I could video this and then I could talk over it and make this into social media because it's relatable. We all have to hang our washing.'

And also, but in my mind it's very hard to get out of work mode. That's where that's like the biggest struggle that I have with the work that I do, especially with social media.

Charlotte Mei

Well, you know, I don't want to take up any more of your time. Thalia, thank you for sharing so much with us today.

Before we go, can I ask for one message or maybe one question for parents or caregivers to keep in mind when it comes to picky eating?

Thalia E Prum

Oh god, how do I pick one. It's also been a pleasure talking to you and it's been like such a long time since I've done a podcast. It's just nice to give like a rundown of all these things.

All right, I will try to make it a statement and a question.

The statement being that — 'it's never too late and it's also never too early'. If you're concerned about your child's eating, to reach out to someone ideally...and we didn't even talk about, we didn't

even cover what talking to a paediatrician or your child's general doctor, because oftentimes you will be fobbed off.

If you think there's something wrong, reach out to somebody like me who works specifically with picky eaters, who is a dietitian. Please make sure they're a dietitian, not just a nutritionist. And to get help at the point where you feel like actually need it. And the earlier you start, the better it is for you.

And then the question to ask yourself would be 'how many how many foods is my child eating from all the food groups?'

Write down, if you're concerned. Because I have a lot of parents that will say to me, 'my kid eats 20 foods' or so when I'm on a live, what I'll usually say is 'take 5 minutes to sit down and physically write down in a notebook or in your notes app or whatever —what are the foods that your child is eating?' And then try to group them into food groups or write a food group next to them so that, you know, are they eating a variety from all the food groups or not? Because if they're not, that's when you can know that that's a red flag like, that's not typical healthy child behaviour.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, great. Those are two very great pieces of advice for our listeners to take away. And one final question. We've spoken so much about food. I ask this to all my guests. If you were craving a dish right now that you, you know, reminds you of childhood or, you know, a great memory that you have, what would that be?

Thalia E Prum

This...it would have to be my mom's veal schnitzel.

Charlotte Mei

Oh wow! How would she prepare it?

Thalia E Prum

She doesn't. She...like my mom. Sorry, mum, if you ever listen to this. She's not the best cook on the planet. But she was always very..she was always '*veggie forward*'. There were always lots of veggies around. There was a salad and there would be cooked veggie.

My mom would crumb this like...maybe it's not as big as I remember because I was so little. But it was what was a piece of lamb that was on the bone, that...oh sorry not lamb...a veal that was on the bone like in a schnitzel. So she would just crumb it up with breadcrumbs and fry it in oil. I don't even think there were spices in there, but I don't know, there was just something about that.

And she doesn't make it anymore. She only makes it with chicken, which is...

Charlotte Mei

....Awww

Thalia E Prum

I know. It's so disappointing,

Charlotte Mei

Well maybe you could put in a request.

Thalia E Prum

I will drop that request next time I speak to my mum. 'Hey mum...' I'll even offer to make them for her.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, well, there you go. Amazing. Thank you so much, Thalia. It was really a pleasure speaking to you

Thalia E Prum

Thank you so much for having me. Likewise. Very much so.

Charlotte Mei

Wow. Thalia came through with a wealth of information. I hope you were taking notes. And to the parents that were listening in, you know, if you do feel isolated in the struggles that you're going through at the dining table with your children, I really, really hope that this episode has helped you.

Please go ahead to follow Thalia on social media. She's on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#), and you can also connect with the other parents that are in her groups.

Now if you found this episode useful —share the link to it by whatsapping it to a friend or posting it on your Instagram stories.

And also, if you like, what you've been hearing on In A Bite so far, don't forget to rate the show so more people get to know about it. To get more content on food and nutrition, follow me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#), the handle is @thecharlottemei.

For the full transcript of this episode, head over to my website, thecharlottemei.com/podcast, and I'll see you at the next one.