



Butterfly Radio: Part 1

The hidden power of habits - how eating habits impact a child's life - present and future

SYLVIA

Hi! I'm Sylvia Thompson. Welcome back to *Butterfly Radio*. As always, we'll explore provocative questions about the challenges that caregivers face helping young children grow into healthy and thriving adults.

Today, I want to start with a story about Tiffany, a preschool teacher in St. Petersburg, Florida. She called in about a month ago, some of you might remember her. Tiffany started off by telling me about her father, James, whose type-2 diabetes had gotten so bad that he could hardly walk or see anymore. Tiffany said it was so hard to see him in so much pain. Earlier in his life, James didn't know that he was predisposed to diabetes although his mother had had it, and he had become overweight. His doctor let him know he was pre-diabetic and gave him the standard line, "You should eat better and exercise more." He didn't take it seriously and eventually he developed diabetes, which became a big problem because he didn't know how to control it; his condition grew worse, and eventually life became very, very difficult for him. Through this experience, Tiffany discovered that it damages every part of the body: the skin, the eyes, the arms and legs, the heart, the kidneys, everything. It was devastating.



I told Tiffany I was sorry about her father's illness, but reminded her that *Butterfly Radio* is a show about caring for young children. She said she

knew that, and then she paused for a long time. “Tiffany,” I asked. “You still there?” “Yes,” she said quietly. “One of the little boys in my classroom...the sweetest child full of curiosity and kindness...his mother came in last week and said that the doctor told her he’s at high risk for developing type-2 diabetes, because it ran in the family, and because he seemed to be gaining weight too fast.” I sighed. I’ve been hearing about this more and more. Tiffany became a bit emotional. “But he’s only four years old! We already have to worry about preventing diabetes? How’s that possible?” she asked. “He doesn’t deserve to deal with this kind of thing already!” Although it’s heartbreaking, I told her, there are a lot of young children at risk of developing type-2 diabetes, part of that is genetic and part of it is their lifestyle—what they eat and how much they move. Tiffany paused again and then asked me what seemed like a straightforward question: ***“As a preschool teacher, I spend so much time with these children. What can I do to help prevent this? I don’t want any little boy or girl to have to deal with the things my dad’s dealing with.”*** 

I thought for a moment, and I ended up giving her that same standard line her father heard from the doctor years back: make sure the children “eat better and exercise more.” But after the call, something didn’t sit right with me about my answer. It felt hurried—a problem of this magnitude deserves a better answer, and more focus. How could Tiffany *really* help? What does it mean to “eat better and exercise more?” We’ve all heard such advice hundreds of times, and yet it’s so difficult to practice everyday, let alone teach others how to do it with confidence! I mean, preschoolers don’t need an exercise regimen, because they move all the time in the classroom and play on the playground. So what is it that we really need to know and understand? I started to think more about these questions. I began to ask around, and the more I asked, the more I learned. We’re not treating the way we’re feeding our children like it’s such a huge problem, because most of the time we don’t see it as a problem at all. If a child loves French fries or cookies, is it really a problem? It makes them happy, and it fills them up!



And the funny thing is it isn't a problem...unless eating those kinds of foods becomes a habit. That's

the connection that that made it all come together for me: when we're young we form habits that are very hard to break, for better or for worse, so, as caregivers and teachers, we need to be really careful about what habits we help children to form.

So today's show is for you, Tiffany. I think your question deserves more attention, as habits developed around food and movement help young children grow into healthy adolescents and adults.

I'd like to start by talking about food and nutrition habits, but don't worry we'll cover movement, physical activity, and play habits also. And, I'll make sure to talk and about developing partnerships with families! An email came in a moment ago from Karen in Kansas City, Missouri. She asks, "What's the relationship between type-2 diabetes and unhealthy weight in childhood?" That's a good place to start, since the two conditions have a lot in common, and the ways you prevent them are similar. ***Children who carry too much weight tend to become adults who are overweight, and being overweight puts you in a high-risk category for type-2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.*** 

This is not to say that we all need to be thin—goodness gracious!—but we do need to have some common sense when it comes to weight. We're all different: we have different faces, different voices, different shoe sizes. Same goes for weight. Some children are big; some children are small; some children short; some children tall. Each of us thrives at a different weight—the weight that is right for us individually; our bodies function best when we maintain it. But when you're overweight for your body type for an extended period of your life, or if you gain too much weight too fast, then you're at a higher risk for developing type-2 diabetes and several other conditions, like high blood pressure and heart disease. That's why a lot of

discussion about preventing type-2 diabetes focuses on maintaining a healthy weight.

And because young children learn so much every single moment, caregivers (families and teachers) are on the *front lines* when it comes to the prevention of unhealthy weight gain and type-2 diabetes. What do I mean by “front lines”? Well, we teach young children both healthy eating and playing (or movement) habits and we strengthen the roots of those habits every day, right from early childhood. Of course, it’s not quite that simple, as anyone who’s served a child broccoli for the first time can tell you. But with a few key concepts, we all can confidently help children grow into healthy adults, and be more mindful of our own health as well.

So, what’s the big deal around “habits”? And how do we crack the nut of maintaining a healthy weight?



Habits are learned behaviors repeated over and over until they are done almost without thinking.

In fact, their purpose is to make your life easier by making some of your actions automatic and taking away the need for decision-making at every moment of every day. Brushing your teeth, drinking your morning coffee, putting on your seatbelt, driving the quickest way to work. Habits take care of all these thousands of little actions and decisions each day.

Some habits, however, can also be troublesome and do not necessarily benefit us in the long-term. Eating habits are good examples. If your habit is to have a burger with fries and a soda every day for lunch, it makes the lunch decision easier, but it can have bad consequences on your health longterm.

Once a habit is formed, it’s difficult to change. So when a young child’s diet is not diverse and consists mostly of foods with lots of calories and not a lot

of nutrition, he's likely to keep to that pattern for his entire life. Reaching for less nourishing foods during mealtime will become automatic.

I want to stress here that not everyone in the world needs to eat *only* vegetables or other “healthy foods” to be healthy, but I can say this: the eating patterns of people in America right now are killing us. That's not meant to be a dramatic statement—it's just the simple truth of the matter. Let's look around and be honest. The human body can take us so far on only hamburgers and soda and donuts and French fries. They're convenient and tasty, but we simply were not designed to eat that much sugar or unhealthy fats all of the time. Of course, we're going to eat those foods sometimes—who wouldn't, they're delicious! But if we eat them on a regular basis...if we make a *habit* out of eating them, we're going to run into lots of health troubles as we get older, or in some cases—such as the boy in Tiffany's classroom—even during childhood.

So, let's go back to Tiffany's original question, “How can I help stop this from happening?” It is THE question, and we're going to spend the rest of the show discussing the answers. In order to prevent children from carrying too much weight and potentially developing type-2 diabetes, you first need to understand the basics of healthy eating and playing habits and then what you, as a caregiver, can do in your classroom to help develop good habits in young children. Next you need to role model behaviors that children can look up to and learn from. And finally, you'll likely need to speak with the families of your students! With confidence and joy you can work in partnership with families to exchange reliable information about helping children live a long and healthy lives.

So whatever kind of caregiver you are, a father, a grandmother, or a preschool teacher, young children rely on you 100% to learn about healthy habits, from brushing teeth to washing hands and eating healthy foods. The habits they develop, the good ones and the bad ones alike, they develop because of you.

