

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 60: Keeping Kids Well-fed and Nourished

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Summary: Children and teenagers need a nutritious diet for strong physical and mental development, but consistently eating healthy can be challenging for youths trying to balance busy schedules and those who struggle with food security. In this episode, Melissa Veatch, a registered dietician at the University of Oklahoma Healthy Futures Clinic, offers tips for helping kids eat healthier consistently, and Jeff Marlow, president and CEO of the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, talks about a bold new program that will provide kid-approved healthy meals to students in all 77 counties in Oklahoma.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Episode 60 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am your host, James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I am Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. Today we are discussing nutrition, especially for children and teenagers. With the new school year now in full swing, students spend a full day learning in the classroom and many participate in any number of before- or afterschool activities. Meanwhile, their bodies are continuing to grow. Kids and teens need a steady diet of nutritious foods to grow in a healthy way and to keep their minds and bodies ready to learn and perform.

J. Tyree: For many Oklahoma youths, eating healthy can be a daily struggle. Some think it's easier or preferable to grab junk or fast food on the go, perhaps not knowing of really delicious healthy options. Many others, though, live in households that struggle to afford food and other basic necessities. Or perhaps they live in a rural or urban food desert, where one must travel several miles for a healthy selection of healthy foods.

S. Carson: In this episode, we will hear from a registered dietician with OU Health who specializes in childhood nutrition. She addresses both food and nutrition insecurity and how we can sift through marketing buzz words to tell which foods are truly healthy. She also will give us tips for parents and caretakers to help their kids eat healthier and expand their willingness to try new foods – even those with picky appetites.

But the first interview today will focus on a bold new nutrition program that will feed many thousands of students across all of Oklahoma. James recently met with the president and CEO of the food bank that developed the program. Let's meet him now and hear their conversation.

Jeff Marlow: My name is Jeff Marlow, and I have the honor to serve as the President and CEO here at the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma in Tulsa.

J. Tyree: Can you tell us a little about the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma?

J. Marlow: Yeah. Thank you for that question. I'd say the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, we serve 24 counties across Oklahoma, but we certainly don't do that work alone. We work alongside a network of nearly 700 partners, community partners, including food pantries, faith-based organizations, schools, shelters, meal programs. Thousands of volunteers come through our doors every year. I think we hit 15,000 last year with volunteers. People give graciously to our organization to help fund and be able to fulfill the mission of the food bank.

Last year alone, James, we distributed more than 34 million pounds of food. That was a record here, an all-time record at the food bank. That's a lot of food, but we could only do it because of our amazing stakeholders, our amazing partners, our wonderful volunteers, and the best team that a CEO could ever ask for that works here at the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: The food bank recently celebrated the launch of FEEDOK, a program that ultimately will feed kids in all 77 counties. How on earth is that possible logistically from your Tulsa location?

J. Marlow: Yeah. Well, first of all, FEEDOK, we're so grateful and proud to partner with TSET. I talked in the last question about our partners and our stakeholders, and I would say that TSET is the champion and wonderful partner and wonderful stakeholder of the FEEDOK program.

When we look at our network and how we are able to make this work across 77 counties, there's two food banks in the state of Oklahoma, one here in Tulsa and one in Oklahoma City called Regional Food Bank. We are part of a network called Feeding America. Feeding America has 200 food banks, just like our own across the whole entire United States, and there's not one county that's overlapped. And so, between the two food banks, we cover all 77 counties here in our amazing state.

We just moved into a new kitchen built on our facility, our site here. We went from a 1,200 square foot kitchen to a 12,000 square foot kitchen with the ballroom. We are able to produce in a day up to 15,000 meals out of that kitchen facility. With partnering with schools and our school pantry programs, both food banks have been doing the backpack programs for years. We've already got the relationships built with the schools and the counselors and the leaders of those schools, and they know the families that need the food the most. Having that network, again, is priceless. And that's something that when we decided that this was a very needed program to launch FEEDOK and to have the opportunity to even pitch it to TSET, we knew it could be a win.

J. Tyree: What kind of meals will be served, and will most kids actually like them?

J. Marlow: What kind of meals? Yummy meals, man. Absolutely. I think the cool thing about FEEDOK is that we actually did a pilot program for a year prior to launching and pitching this to TSET to ramp up and scale up to the capacity of 77 counties. We started out with 20 schools here locally that we put our meals out into the schools. We have QR codes on those meals to give us feedback, real-time feedback of what the kids liked, more of this, less of that, put this kind of sauce, sub that. We took that feedback and created the meals that we have today and still continue to receive feedback because we still have those QR codes on our meals.

That's how we're building these meals because this program means nothing if the kids aren't going to eat it and get the nourishment and the fuel and everything that this meal is supposed to fulfill if they don't like it.

J. Tyree: It's good to know kids enjoy the meals, but are they nutritious, too?

J. Marlow: Yes, sir. Absolutely. That's important too, right? A good, well-balanced, nutritious meal. It helps you with your health. It helps you with your learning at school. Hopefully, your attendance is going to improve as well. Just all those things that are important. Yes.

J. Tyree: With free and reduced-cost breakfast and lunch program already offered at schools, why is FEEDOK needed in our state? How big an issue is childhood hunger in Oklahoma?

J. Marlow: The reality that's unfortunate about Oklahoma is that new reports just recently came out and we are the number one state in the nation, number 51 for child food insecurity. That's not good. Reality is, James, is that a very large percentage of our Oklahoma children are on the free and reduced meal, like you just mentioned. We also know reality is that when school's in session, some of the only meals these children might be receiving are the breakfast and the lunch that they are getting provided by their school. And so, what are they doing on the weekends? What are they doing during the holidays? What are they doing during the summertime? That is why FEEDOK is so important. That is why we decided to launch FEEDOK is for the schools that know those children better than anybody, the counselors, the principals, the teachers that they're working with, the coaches, whoever, the list of who oversees and are the guardians of our children at those schools, they're the ones that know who need it the most. We want to make sure that kids are able to be children and not have to worry about where their next meal comes from.

J. Tyree: How will school personnel get these meals to students for them to take home?

J. Marlow: Probably every school has their system down of how they send the meals home with the child. We have insulated bags that every school has gotten, because the meals are frozen and they get to take them home. So whether they do it on a Friday afternoon or on a Monday, I bet that everybody does it a little bit different.

- J. Tyree: I asked about the sizable logistics of this program, how is the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma able to fund this huge undertaking to feed so many kids?
- J. Marlow: This program is much bigger than the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma. There's no way we could alone do this. The evidence helped us secure that we just talked about and that we presented in our pitch to TSET to fund FEEDOK helped us secure the \$9.4 million of a three-year grant from TSET. That is what's funding this.
- We also, in our early on pilot program from Morning Crest and Blue Cross Blue Shields, they were two champions that helped us feed the 20 schools and put meals in the schools to collect the data and to show that there is measurable outcomes here that are positive that helped ultimately launch this program. We are so grateful and indebted to TSET's belief and trust in the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma and seize the true need of why this program is so important.
- J. Tyree: So, ultimately, how many meals will the FEEDOK program serve to students across Oklahoma?
- J. Marlow: Yeah. So, over the three-year period, we are going to be on track. We've already started the program to serve 1.7 million meals, and that's a lot of meals.
- J. Tyree: What other programs does the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma have that help kids and families stay fed?
- J. Marlow: We invest in a lot of different ways to get food to children and families because there isn't one single solution to hunger. It comes in so many different creative ways. We just came off of a record-breaking summer feeding. You got 90 days, less than 90 days really, to feed kids. We served over 800,000 meals in those 90 days to Eastern Oklahomans. But yeah, with schools and community organizations rescue food from retailers, we distribute fresh produce and protein and we have mobile programs as well and provide food through hundreds of community pantries and meal sites. It comes in all different forms and shapes and sizes.
- J. Tyree: When people are struggling, how can they get food assistance for themselves or their families?
- J. Marlow: The first easy one, I'm going to give one of our great partners and community leaders, organizations in Tulsa shoutout a United Way. You can (call) 211 and be able to find resources throughout your area. That's the easiest way. just hit 211 and be able to put your zip code and some information and have a list of where you can get help for the people listening.
- But also, you can go to our website for the neighbors that are listening that could use some help at okfoodbank.org. We do have a pantry finder on that as well on our website and be able to see in the 24-county service area, all the different pantry sites

that you can go get assistance from. That's from a neighbor aspect. If you needed to call us, call us as well. We can help you navigate or come up to the food bank and see us. We will help figure it out one way.

J. Tyree: Conversely, how can people provide support for the food bank's work?

J. Marlow: But from a potential listener that is wanting to help get involved in the mission and volunteer or give financially or you have a gift of some kind of a skill that you feel like could help us move that needle in the fight against hunger, and the same way, you can visit our website and be able to reach out to us, communicate with us, but also giving us a shout as well. Cash is king. This is a big monster. It takes a lot of money to do what we do.

For people listening, we just had our board meeting last week and our impact report of the value of food that's going out of our facility to our neighbors through our partner network, it's 9 cents a pound. So, that is the value that the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma and the food bank down in Oklahoma City, that's the value we give to Oklahoma neighbors in need through our partners is \$0.09 a pound. It's priceless, James. For you and I to go to the store and get a mixed basket of groceries, we're going to spend around \$2.75 a pound on average for that mixed basket of groceries. When you hear 9 cents a pound going out of our facility, and it's only because of everyone listening and our stakeholders, the people that are helping, our volunteers that give countless hours, that's what makes that value.

J. Tyree: That really is tremendous. Thank you for your time, Jeff, and for the important work the food bank and its many partners is doing.

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S. Carson: FEEDOK will produce a major impact on the health and well-being of students, with the program's aim to provide 1.7 million meals to kids over the next three years. That's the kind of transformational impact the TSET Board of Directors sought to make in awarding the historic TSET Legacy Grants.

But TSET also supports local efforts to help more kids, seniors and everyone in between eat healthier through Built Environment Grants for Nutrition and Access to Healthy Foods and Targeted Achievement Grants for Nutrition. Some schools and communities have also used their TSET Healthy Incentive Grants to fund kitchen equipment to increase local food access.

J. Tyree: Community and statewide programs that address nutrition are very important for our state. But healthy eating begins at home with families.

- S. Carson: And families, regardless of income levels, can face a variety of challenges to ensuring their children eat the balanced diet they need to grow strong and be at their best. Our next guest recently spoke with James about strategies parents, grandparents and other caregivers can use to provide healthy foods for their families.
- M. Veatch: I'm Melissa Veatch. I am a dietitian, and I work in two different clinics at OU Health. I work at the primary care clinics, senior pediatrics, and then I also work in the Healthy Futures Pediatric Weight Management Clinic.
- J. Tyree: Before we delve into our topic, what got *you* interested in nutrition in general and childhood nutrition in particular?
- M. Veatch: Yeah, so kind of two parts to that story there. In college, I was a collegiate swimmer and I remember they brought a dietitian in and she talked to us about how nutrition can help support our performance. And I just found that really fascinating. So that's what brought me into becoming a dietetics major. And then working with the pediatric population, so growing up, I always loved working with kids. I was a swim instructor, swim coach, loved working with the kids. And during my dietetic internship, I was lucky enough to actually intern at a pediatric weight management clinic in Tulsa, actually. It was very similar to the one that I'm in now. And that's where I just fell in love with working with not only the pediatric population, but I love the fact that I get to work with the family unit. So how the family can operate and help our little ones.
- J. Tyree: We hear a lot about food insecurity, but a similar but different concern is nutrition security. How would you define the difference and is nutrition security any more or less important for families?
- M. Veatch: Yeah, great question and something that I deal with every day, honestly. So food security is does a family have access to enough food, right? And then nutrition security takes that one step further. Do they have access to nutritious foods that help support health? And so when you look at nutrition security or both really, it's access, cost, transportation, different barriers to them. And something that I don't think that many people really talk about is also how education plays a role in that, specifically nutrition education.
- So where my role might come into that is educating about what nutritious food might be. And so one is not more important than the other, I don't think. If a family is dealing with food insecurity, we have to address that first before we can talk about the nutritious foods that they can then implement after we address that food insecurity.
- J. Tyree: September is National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, and I want to ask how and obesity affects the health of children.
- M. Veatch: Yeah. So obesity is a chronic complex disease. It affects multiple systems in a person with excess weight on their body. So for example, a child with excess weight can have

high cholesterol or might have fatty liver disease, might have prediabetes, type two diabetes. It also can impact sleep and quality of life. And when we talk about quality of life or National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, I think we really have to address stigma about obesity and making it very clear to families out there that are dealing with children with excess weight that it's not their fault, that weight is not tied to worth. It's really more about biology, genetics, and environment.

J. Tyree: As a follow-up, what steps can be taken to help kids stay at or regain a healthy weight?

M. Veatch: Some of the things that I am always looking at when I talk to any of my families, when I'm doing assessments, we're looking at sugary beverages, what is the frequency or how often are we having sugary beverages and can we limit that? And then on top of that is added sugars, what snacks and different foods are we eating that have added sugars because we know that increased added sugars directly affects weight gain.

It can affect appetite. It can affect cravings. So that's kind of one of the first, what I call those low-hanging fruits of the nutrition assessment that I do. And then I look at plate composition, right? What do those meals look like that we are serving our children in any food environment? Does it have enough fruit or vegetable? Are we getting our fiber throughout the day? Are we getting whole proteins? Are we getting enough whole grains mixed in our day on those plates? And then what is the portion of each of those on the plate? And then of course, we have to look at sleep and physical activity because those all play a role as well in maintaining a healthy weight.

M. Veatch: In the Healthy Futures Clinic that I work, I'm so thankful that I'm able to work with a team. So when we see patients with excess body weight, changing nutrition habits is hard. Changing physical activity habits or sedentary behavior or sleep hygiene is really hard to do. And so we always take the approach that it's the family unit that's doing it. So just because one child in the family may have excess weight, we really stress to the whole family that what we're talking about here in this clinic is actually healthy for everybody in the household to be doing. We don't want to single out this one child.

J. Tyree: Some kids, from toddlers through teenagers, can be a bit picky about what they want to eat. How can parents and others who care for young ones help them eat and even enjoy foods that are good for them?

M. Veatch: Yeah, I talk about picky eating every day at work and at home. That's a big topic, right? The main thing that I always go for when I talk about picky eating is first of all, let's normalize it. There are kids, toddlers, it's a normal part of development, but there are some that get stuck in a little bit more of a picky eating behavior. And for those kids and even for the ones that are just going through a little phase, I always say keep the food environment, so the table, wherever we're eating, neutral. We don't want to be, you have to sit at the table until you eat this food, or you have to eat your whole plate. Keeping it neutral and keeping it just, you put it on the plate and that's that.

Another big thing is that positive role modeling, and this is where family meals can be really important. So everybody in the family or whoever is available sitting down at the same time as that picky eater to eat the meal, showing that they are also enjoying that non-preferred food. And then always exposure, exposure, exposure. The more that we can put it on their plate and expose them to that non-preferred food or however many non-preferred foods, the faster that we'll get out of this space. So we know it can take up to 20 times of serving that same food to a kid before that they will even decide if they're going to like it or not. Just because your kid has said that they don't like broccoli or whatever for the past two weeks, don't stop serving it. Always, always serve it.

And then two other ones that I think are important to note is when they are able to communicate to you what it is that they may not or maybe like about certain food, so keeping that communication line open. Maybe it's texture. Well, we can manipulate how the texture of food by different ways of cooking it. Maybe it's taste. Maybe they need a dip or a different sauce or a different seasoning. So there's lots of ways to help your child through picky eating. And then the last little tidbit that I always go for is get them involved. So whether that's bringing them to the grocery store to pick out a different vegetable or a different fruit, and then getting them in the kitchen to help you choose.

Kids take a lot of pride in the things that they help to do or help create. And so if they're in there helping you, they're much more likely to at least try it once it's on their plate.

J. Tyree: Food and drink can be every bit as trendy as fashion. For instance, protein snacks and whole fat seem to be in now. What nutritional trends do you see rising and what do you make of them?

M. Veatch: Yeah. Gosh, you can't go anywhere without seeing protein plastered on every box and snack and food that there is right now. There's protein pasta, protein cookies, protein chips. And my take on it is a lot of it is marketing scheme, right? Just because it says protein whatever doesn't automatically make it a healthy product for us to be eating. A lot of times it's still a super highly processed food to be eating. So when I look at things, I'm looking to see does it have fiber or is it a complete protein?

J. Tyree: So if people take the time to read nutrition labels, how do they know what they're actually reading?

M. Veatch: So it can be tricky because a lot of people who maybe haven't seen a dietician or haven't really talked about it are just going to go off of what the front of the box says. And that can be a little deceiving. So I always talk about reading our food labels. Anytime that you're getting something from a box or a bag, look at that food label, look at what it has to say on there, and then look at the ingredient list. Good rule of thumb a lot of times is a shorter ingredient list is usually better.

J. Tyree: The TSET program [Shape Your Future](#) offers tips and resources that help families with no time or money to waste create meals and snacks that will please both kids and adults. What are your thoughts on Shape Your Future, and do you have any additional nutritional tips for kids and families on the go?

M. Veatch: I really do reference Shape Your Future all the time. I actually had a resident doctor learning about nutrition the other day that was asking me questions on resources and I was like, "Oh yeah, Shape Your Future. Tell your patients to go check that out."

I always use it for our busy families. Go there. Check out a recipe. There are a million on there, first of all, but you could filter it to get quick ones that you could do on a Tuesday after basketball practice of ingredients that you probably have in your house. I use it all the time as a tool and a teaching resource.

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S. Carson: As Melissa just mentioned, the Shape Your Future website really is a valuable place for finding tips and resources for helping families eat healthier, including those with limited time or money. That website is <https://shapeyourfutureok.com> and I invite our listeners to check it out.

But there's another website that's geared specifically for teens called Swap Up. It can be found at <https://swapupok.com>. Swap Up presents information to youths in a relatable way so they can learn how different types of food affect their mood and performance, and how they can easily swap a junk food choice for a nutritious but tasty one that boosts their energy and well-being.

J. Tyree: Another website to visit often is <https://oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast>, where you can listen to this or any episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast. They can also be downloaded anywhere you normally listen to podcasts.

S. Carson: In closing, childhood nutrition isn't just about childhood. The foods and drinks kids consume now and the eating habits they form can have a lasting effect on their health into adulthood. And so we thank Jeff Marlow for telling us about the new FEEDOK program and Melissa Veatch for the food for thought she provided today. And as always, we thank you for joining us today. Take care, eat well, enjoy the fall weather and, until next time, this is Sarah Carson ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree, wishing you peace ...

S. Carson: And better health.