



Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

Season 4, Episode 11: Supporting Picky Eating with Katie Kimball

Jodi Cohen: Hello and welcome to Essential Alchemy. Alchemy is defined as the power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious or impressive way. My hope is that the information in this podcast can help you transform your mood, energy, physical health, or even some dots to help you shift your mental or emotional state. I'm your host, Jodi Cohen, a bestselling author, award-winning journalist, functional practitioner, lifelong learner, and founder of Vibrant Blue Oils, a company that sells proprietary blends of high-quality, organic, or wildcrafted essential oil remedies designed to help you return to your ideal mental, physical, and emotional state. You can find out more about me and my company at vibrantblueoils.com. And with that, let's get started with today's episode.

Hi, I'm Jodi Cohen and I'm super excited to share the brilliance of my dear friend Katie Kimball, who has four kids aged seven to 14, and she is the national Voice of Healthy Kids cooking as a blogger, two time TEDx speaker, former teacher who founded Kids Cook Real Foods, which is recommended by the Wall Street Journal as the best online cooking class for kids. Her blog, Kitchen Stewardship helps families stay healthy without going crazy, and she's on a mission to connect families around healthy food, raise critical thinking skills, use the Lab of Curiosity in this kitchen, and grow kids' meal revolution where every child learns to cook. Welcome, Katie.

Katie Kimball: Well, thank you so much, Jodi. I wish my oldest was 14. He is actually 17.

Jodi Cohen: Oh, 17, sorry.

Katie Kimball: Seven to 17. Yes, we have one in every school building, which means my email is out of control.

Jodi Cohen: Oh my God. Well, and I love it. Before we started recording, we were kind of talking about how picky eating is not just for littles. It really goes all the way up into adolescence and adulthood. So I'd love it if you could kind of just share what got you into this.

Katie Kimball: I think I had a pretty standard eighties childhood. We ate sort of packaged convenience food, although my mom did cook a lot from scratch. God bless her. And so that was what I took into my own young adulthood. So it was bag salad, bottle dressing, hamburger helper, the normal stuff. And my own real food conversion definitely started when I got pregnant with Paul 17 years ago, 18 years ago, because it was just getting hit with a ton of bricks. Like every bite matters so much I have growing this new life.

Katie Kimball: That was the very first thing that I searched in that kind of, oh my gosh, there's a new life inside me. What do I eat? I typed and found the Bradley birth method, and they do such a nice job of being comprehensive with movement and food and preparing the body for the actual labor.

So we made little tiny changes at first, like, okay, we're going to ditch margarine and use butter. We're going to change our brand of tortilla chips so that they have slightly fewer additives. They were just so tiny at first, and then once I started feeding the actual baby food, it just snowballed from there. And so I became very much a real food, whole foods proponent and advocate, and I made all the mistakes. I burned all the things. I cut everything wrong. I did not know what I was doing, but I'm a teacher by trade and just my teacher brain as I was standing at the cutting board and burning things on the stove was thinking, how can I make this easier for other mamas out there who were on this journey trying to save money and not spend all their time in the kitchen? It just felt like it was a constant stretch.

And that's kind of where the idea of kitchen stewardship came about stewardship, is caring for all of the gifts we've been given our time and our budget and our family's nutrition, and heck, the environment too. So in 2009, that's I started teaching online just teaching people how to do these techniques in a baby-step fashion, giving yourself grace, and just really choosing the techniques that don't stretch the tension that can save time and money at the same time. So I built this amazing community. I just loved being online and connecting with other women all around the world, but then I kept hearing the same story, and it was Katie, I do want to get healthy, but this is so hard because I was never taught to cook. That's kind of our whole generation. Yeah, absolutely. Me too. And I thought, okay, generationally, if we're not taught to cook, we are not comfortable teaching our kids, and in 20 years people are going to be saying the same thing.

Our grownup kids will be saying, oh man, I wish I could be healthier, but I was never taught to cook. So I thought, okay, I'm a teacher. I'm a mom of four. Maybe I'm the person to step into this gap and stop the cycle and really help parents make it easier to teach their kids to cook. So that's kind of where kids cook real food was born. And I very quickly realized that no mom, very few moms are walking around going, oh, I just have such a problem. I wish I could teach my kids to cook. But many of them are walking around going, Ugh, if my kids would just freaking eat what I make, life would be better if I could get a vegetable past their lips. So I'm like, okay, parents need their kids to eat better. What they don't know is that getting them in the kitchen is really going to help. So that's where I started sort of building this picky eating knowledge and have done some training. And so now I can be a picky eating expert who can really help. I'm really helping a lot of parents help kids build a great relationship with food.

Jodie Cohen: Well, no, and it's amazing, and I was sharing that my 17-year-old told me that she's the only person she knows that doesn't have some kind of eating issue, be it body dysmorphia, one of the more severe problems, or even just, I only eat beige food.

Katie Kimball: I do think picky eating is a huge epidemic, and if kids aren't encountering foods in the elementary years, or better yet in the preschool and toddler years, they really don't know how to interact with food. And there are so many kids, and I do believe that extrapolates onto our teens who are actually afraid of food or afraid of trying new foods, Jodi, you would not believe, many families in my picky eating membership will tell about their kids. And if the kid walks up to the table and sees a vegetable on the table, they literally scream and run away. It's not just like complaining like, oh, I don't like what you made, Mom. They are so afraid of that vegetable. They're out of there. So it is a very serious problem, and I'm so sad to hear that in the teens. It is developing into this eating disorder and the body image stuff. Man, that's just hard to watch.

Jodi Cohen: Yeah, a lot of her friends, basically, if it's not a carbohydrate, forget it.

Katie Kimball: Sugar's not playing with a full deck. They've got the ACEs up their sleeve. I just feel like any time the sugar and the processed foods come into play, it's unfair because they're so addictive and they're pulling our kids in.

Jodi Cohen: Yeah. So I'm really curious, tell me how you work with people. You get a new client whose child is afraid of vegetables. How do you kind of stairstep them through adding new foods and introducing their kids?

Katie Kimball: Yeah. Well, I'm not a therapist, so I don't take on individual clients. We just have a membership where we build this community, and I do walk my pep club, my picky eating playbook, and parents through a five-step process with the goal of building a good relationship with food. I mean, step zero is to dismantle a lot of our existing beliefs about picky eating because first of all, most parents think that the picky eating problem is a food problem. And for most kids, picky eating is not about the food. It either. Sometimes it has to do with a relationship or a power struggle with the parents, but almost always at its root cause picky eating starts with something physiological. Either there's a sensory processing issue that the child is really interacting with food so much differently than us as an adult that we can't understand why they can't encounter a new food and be okay with that.

Katie Kimball: There are a lot of kids who have swallowing and chewing issues now. Those baby food pouches did nothing to help kids learn to encounter food, which is really interesting. So typically picky eating has at its root something physiological, and then the parents get fearful because what's our job? Our job is to keep the kid alive, and if they're not eating much or anything or doing the right thing, we get scared. And then that interplay can start to exacerbate what could have been a smaller physiological issue. And then we get some of the power struggles, and then we get some of the pressure situations going on. And sometimes the pressure goes from child to parent, which is when the parent says, Man if chicken nuggets are the only thing my kid will eat, I got to feed 'em chicken nuggets. I got to keep 'em alive. So we have to dismantle those existing beliefs.

And then we work through a process of figuring out an eating routine of figuring out when and how to serve those vegetables, structuring the mealtime environment in a really helpful way, and then moving through how we allow our kids to have preferences and not assume that they are then labeled as a picky eater. So the steps are, to prepare the space, lead with your ace, set the pace, keep a poker face, and give them grace. So we just kind of move through all those, and that poker face is really important because if we're pressuring our kids to eat, we end up really breaking a lot of their hunger and satiety cues and forming a negative relationship with food. And so again, a lot of dismantling of what's going on.

Jodi Cohen: I really love it. It's interesting because my second child had a lot of sensory things, and I remember finally taking him somewhere and realizing certain aspects of what I thought were, his personality had nothing to do with his personality at all. They were sensory-driven, and it was mind blown. So that's great that you're sharing that with people. Say someone comes to you with a kid who won't eat or is afraid of the vegetables, and so you've helped them reframe things, but then where do you start? How do you kind of step and babystep someone into introducing formerly frightening foods?

Katie Kimball: Absolutely. Step one is definitely to make sure that the appetite is actually there. We overfeed our kids here in North America where too many snacks. Snacks are too big, snacks are too highly palatable. They're the munchy crunchies, they're the things that the kids want to eat. And when the child knows that they'll have snacks anytime they want, dinner is optional. So step one is to make sure that we're creating a lot of space between snack time and dinner time. And to change a little bit about how the snack looks, it's not unlimited. It's a little more balanced. So then the kids are coming to the table with an appetite, so at least they've got that going for them. Leading with your ace is my second step because I do encourage parents to put that ace those vegetables out first, and then they're keeping their poker face.

Katie Kimball: So if the child wants to run away, if the child wants to run away, that's okay. You say that's okay. You can come back for dinner when you're ready. And for many families, that is a huge paradigm shift because they may have been saying, if you eat three bites of broccoli, you can have some ice cream, or you have to eat three bites of broccoli before you leave the table, or you have to finish this food. And all of that pressure interplay can really be damaging to kids' affinity for food or their relationship with food. The most powerful thing for the kids who are actually afraid is to remove the whole experience from the table to completely remove any idea that they have to put food in their mouth, which means either getting them involved in the kitchen prep or literally doing some crafts with food where there's clearly no obligation that anyone's going to eat. So a kid might be using a stick of asparagus to paint with ketchup or hummus. Oh, that's cool. Oh yeah, on paper with No, it's not at the table. There's nothing to do with eating. And that can actually help to inoculate their senses a little bit and get them that exposure where they can Exposure

Jodi Cohen: Therapy, I love it.

Katie Kimball: Make friends with food. I prefer the kitchen so much more practical. But for kids who are really dealing with a lot of that fear, they kind of need a both-and approach.

Jodi Cohen: And I love it. So some of these recipes, I can see parents thinking like, oh, my child had knives. That could be dangerous. What aspects of food preparation do you like to get the kids involved in?

Katie Kimball: I love getting knives in the hands of children since now, don't take that the wrong way. No, I mean, here's the thing. What's going to motivate the child? So if they're two or three, learning how to measure a teaspoon of salt is good.

Jodi Cohen: Yeah. Scramble an egg.

Katie Kimball: Yeah, use a whisk. Anything really, when they're 2, 3, 4, and five, they're good. They're excited about being in the kitchen. For kids who are a little older, I am a huge advocate that once a child can read and write, they can do just about anything in the kitchen that an adult can, maybe minus the chef's knife. But we put sharp hands, sharp knives in the hands of six and seven-year-olds, again with proper training. So we teach really fun phrases like up and over soldier and tug of whirlpool so that the family has this vocabulary to talk about where your fingers go, where the knife goes, how you move the knife, how you hold the food so that everything is super safe and there's a trust built as the kids build these skills. So yeah, I'm actually a huge advocate of getting kids to wash and cut produce as early as everyone in the family feels ready for that.

Jodi Cohen: Do you have video trainings where people can watch you? Okay, that's great.

Katie Kimball: That's great. Yeah, we do. That was my flagship course kids cook Real Food. And so I'm an educator. I was a third-grade teacher for a couple of years. I just took about 30 basic skills that I think any human being needs to follow most recipes and figured out, okay, what comes first? How do we build this scaffolding on another? What can kids who are age two to five developmentally handle? Now what can kids who are age six to 10 developmentally handle? And so we built a course with Yes, professionally filmed videos, kids' hands doing the skills. And one thing I'm really proud of because so many kids and families have food sensitivities and food allergies, is that I'm really skills focused. So you are learning to roll dough, or you are learning to follow a recipe, or you are learning to use the stove safely and the food is secondary, such that anyone with an allergy sensitivity or picky preference can just easily swap out the recipe and still practice the same skill and do the same kind of techniques and motions when they're finished with our kids. Cook Real Food eCourse. Kids know how to tackle just about any normal recipe, no creme brulee and flaming torches or anything, but things that regular families would cook using Whole Foods.

Jodi Cohen: So I'm wondering if my daughter who's going to college in the fall is too old for your kids' cook course.

Katie Kimball: Some teens still love it. Some teens say, oh, the kids in the videos are too little. So I always recommend to the teenager parents is to find a cousin or a neighbor or someone who is 10 and under and have the teenager be the teacher's assistant, and then they just learn by assimilation.

Jodi Cohen: Oh that's a wonderful idea. Okay. So then the next question is helping, do you provide recipes? Do you help them pick recipes? Do you have strategies when you have multiple kids with multiple preferences, how to decide what meal you're eating when...

Katie Kimball: And Yeah. Well, in the Kids Cook Real Food course, we obviously have to make some food. So there are recipes, and then we provide lots of swaps for alternate diets. When we talk picky eating, deconstructing the meal is one of my set-the-paste strategies for that environment of mealtime. And I think a lot of parents do this naturally, but they don't always think about doing it with every meal. So a really natural deconstructed meal is like a burrito bowl. You have maybe your rice or your quinoa, you might have some salad chopped up, have some cooked protein, some beans, maybe corn or green onions, and you have all these toppings and everyone goes through and picks what they want.

Katie Kimball: So you're eating the same meal. You have that family unity and that dinner cohesion, the cook who is often the adult, but hopefully the kids are starting to help, has only had to make one thing because there are many, many, many families, I wish there was a study to have percentages.

Jodi Cohen: Oh, how many order chefs?

Katie Kimball: Yeah, how many short-order cooks there are? Yes. Making two, even three meals a night, which is just painful for me to hear. And I'm like, okay, mama's team, one meal, we need to be on team one meal. So that burrito bar, again, people kind of do that naturally, but they don't always think about that with something like stir fry or pasta or, oh, I make a lot of casseroles. And so we do have to sort of brainstorm together as a community, how can we deconstruct this so that everyone eats the same meal, but even our pickiest of eaters, our most preference, most selective eaters can see at least one or two things that are their safe foods, but yet get exposure to other things. And mom and daughter is only making one meal.

Jodi Cohen: That's amazing. So you could have the protein on the side if you have a vegan or dairy on the side or love that.

Katie Kimball: Exactly. And even casserole can sometimes be deconstructed. I have a dairy-free daughter, and so we have a casserole we make with sliced potatoes and ground beef and a couple of other vegetables, and that is like a homemade cream of chicken sauce. Well, obviously dairy-free, she can't do that, but all we have to do is prep everything and put hers in a tiny casserole dish. It all goes in the oven at the same time, and she just has some olive oil instead of the sauce. It makes it pretty easy. And so there's always a way. So I don't think families with picky eaters need new recipes. That's the thing. Everyone wants that as their turnkey solution. Give me the best recipe for a picky eater. That's just not how it works. It's about the strategy and the environment that we set up.

Jodi Cohen: Oh my gosh, I absolutely love that. That's brilliant. And I know you have strategies for restaurant eating too. I'm curious how you tackle that because that's another one. If you have a picky eater, it makes it hard to go out and sometimes mom wants a night off.

Katie Kimball: Yeah. Well, goodness, unfortunately, with the picky eaters, it's easy to go out because the kids' meal is chicken nuggets, pizza, Mac, and cheeseburgers generally that's what our picky eaters like. But if you have healthy eating intentions with kids, it is hard to go out because as soon as they have that kid's menu, it's all the beige. It's like the bar food and the county fair food. Why are we putting up with that being the kid's menu? It's absolutely ridiculous.

Katie Kimball: We tend to have our kids split an adult meal when they're younger, and generally they're tastier. To be honest, our kids, they want an adult meal. And so our only problem now is that they're very expensive to take out because now they eat a lot, even though they're in the kids' meal age range, they want those adult meals. But that's kind of what we do. And just seeking, in most restaurants, you can seek out your vegetables, you can skip the bun if carbs aren't your friend. You know what I mean? There are always little strategies.

Jodi Cohen: And I'm curious because I, as a mom who made breakfast for her children for far too long, if you have ideas for teaching kids how to make their own breakfast beyond pouring cereal and milk in a bowl, make their own lunches, is that something you get into?

Katie Kimball: Well, it's something that my kids do. Definitely. Definitely. Absolutely. And that's the beauty of skills over recipes really, Jodi, right? Is that once a child knows how to safely use the stove now it's pretty easy for them to make pancakes for them to fry an egg or scramble an egg. My kids, like I said, I have four kids in four different schools. We've got three different start times in the morning. It is an absolute circus around here. So my two older kids, Paul and Leah actually get up before I do most days, and they just ask the night before, what are you thinking for breakfast tomorrow? And so they easily know how to scramble some eggs, add some cheese for those who can eat the cheese and just fry up some well-sourced sausage. And in fact, my daughter, she's so industrious, she made a list not too long ago.

Well, we went through a kitchen remodel, and so we knew that in the first few weeks when the kitchen was all torn up, we had to cook in the basement. And so she and I worked together and we made muffins and waffles and grain-free pancakes and just froze all this stuff. And once we were through the kitchen remodel, Leah said, I really liked having that stuff in the freezer that made breakfast so much easier one or two days a week. So she took it upon herself one weekend to restock the freezer with the blended cashew waffles and the grain-free pumpkin pancakes and muffins and all this stuff. And so that's been really, really nice. My other secret is that the Instant Pot can make your oatmeal for you while you're sleeping, and then it's hot when the first person gets out of bed. So we do Instant Pot oatmeal at least twice a week as well.

Jodi Cohen: Oh, I love that. That's great. Congratulations. Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for someone who's like, oh, wow, what a concept. I can teach my kids to cook. I can stop being a short-order chef. Anything else that people have really been excited about?

Katie Kimball: I just think the motivation for parents is what's needed the most because we have so many roadblocks. One of the questions we ask families who do buy our course is like, what's the hardest part? Now? You've already bought a course, you're committed to this, but what's the hardest part even now about getting into the kitchen? And it's like, oh, it's hard to find the time. It's hard to motivate the kids. This is my haven. I don't want to slow down. I don't want the kids to be messy. So we have a ton of psychological roadblocks, and I think to dismantle those in order to motivate ourselves to really believe I need to teach my kids to cook, I want to future cast parents and say, this is not a burden for your kids. This is not something horrible that we're doing to them, this is a huge gift that when they are young adults, you and I both have a child heading off to college within the next year and a half or so, and I'm so just pleased beyond belief that when my kids are young adults, they can be pursuing their career.

They can be figuring out who they love in life, instead of wandering about some young adults today going, oh gosh, what do I feed myself? Ramen noodles again, frozen pizza, eating out. That's stressful if not for the mind, but for the body. I want them to know how to actually nourish themselves. And so I want them to make the mistakes in my house, and not only in the future but there are so many benefits now when kids know how to do authentic tasks that adults do. That is true. They don't need participation ribbons. They don't need platitudes of Good job, honey. No, because they're actually feeding and nourishing other human beings. There is no better way to build truth. And I can't think of anything that kids need more right now than a strong sense of self.

Jodi Cohen: Yes. And empowerment. I love that. How can people find your programs work more with you, and learn more?

Katie Kimball: Absolutely. Well, all the fun real-life stuff is on Instagram at Kids Cook Real Food, and then kidscookrealfood.com is the house for everything. We run a picky eating challenge a couple of times a year, and those are really popular. Kind of feel the momentum of a community working together and trying some new things and seeing kids maybe take tastes or allow food on a plate. There are a lot of measures of success that don't all have to do with food going past the child's lips. But yeah, we're always doing something to help families connect around healthy food and really build that good relationship.

Jodi Cohen: Wonderful. Well, I'm going to sign up for the Picky Eater Challenge. I know enough people in my life that could use it. Thank you so much for your time, and it's always great to see you.

Katie Kimball: It's a delight. Jodi, thanks for having me.

Jodi Cohen: Thank you so much for listening. I hope this podcast empowered you with some useful information and takeaways. If you liked this episode, please consider sharing a positive review or subscribing. I would also love to offer you my free parasympathetic toolkit as a gift just for listening. It will teach you how to activate the most important nerve in your body to turn on your ability to heal. This free toolkit includes a checklist, a video, and a detailed guide. If this podcast prompted any questions, you can always find answers at my blog at vibrantblueoils.com or my book Essential Oils to Boost the Brain and Heal the Body. Until next time, wishing you Vibrant Health.