



Episode 5: Reframing Healthy Food and Healthy Bodies

For Latina parents like Melissa Huerta in Berwyn, IL, providing her children with food that reflects her Mexican upbringing is a priority. But this objective is complicated by the relative convenience of processed foods, and her 9-year-old daughter's preference for spaghetti and meatballs. In this episode, reporter Julia Binswanger digs into the array of issues facing families looking to feed their children healthy and culturally significant foods, as well as the implications of new guidelines around childhood obesity. Leaders at organizations working to provide fresh produce and culturally specific food staples discuss their work in neighborhoods across Chicago, many of which are in food deserts.

Julia Binswanger: By 2050, Latinas will make up a quarter of all women in the US. They're gaining an education, participating in the labor market more, accumulating wealth, and embracing entrepreneurship. This is 100 Latina Birthdays, an open source podcast from LWC Studios about the health, wellness and lifetime outcomes of Latinas in the US. Our narrative, investigation and celebration of Latina health and wellbeing is focused on Chicago, but it has widespread national implications. In the first season, we will chronicle Latina women and girls in the first two decades of their lives, from birth to age 20. I'm Julia Binswanger.

In this episode, we're digging into food and nutrition. How are meals changing between first, second, and third generation Latinos? What does it mean to eat healthy, and how are community members helping families feed children both nutritious and filling meals?

Child 1: Rice, pasta and ketchup.

Child 2: Pizza, because we have pepperonis on it.

Julia Binswanger: In June 2023, I went to Chicago's Puerto Rican Fest in Humboldt Park to talk to kids about their favorite foods.

Child 3: My mom, she makes white rice with potatoes and beans, and it's really good.

Child 4: Lucky Charms.

Julia Binswanger: A parade of honking cars with people waving Puerto Rican flags ran down Division Street. A long line spanned the block around Humboldt Park to get inside and once inside there were carnival rides, food tents, stages with live bands and kids running around. Some of the girls sported Puerto Rican flag

dresses. Most of the kids I talked with were sitting on the grass or at picnic tables with their parents eating foods from vendors.

Child 5: I love eggs. They go good with every food.

Child 6: Ice cream and tacos.

Child 7: My favorite, favorite food is tacos.

Julia Binswanger: Remember that feeling as a kid when a parent forced you to eat something you hated like peas or Brussels sprouts? It's likely that we have different feelings around food and taste as kids than we do as adults. Studies from the Monell Chemical Senses Center show that as we get older [our taste buds mature and change](#). Children are born preferring sweet tastes and avoiding bitter ones. Biologically, this can be helpful as a little boost in sugar could be important, extra energy for a young and growing body, but this preference for sweets can also make it difficult to get kids to go for healthier fare, like veggies. Plus, human bodies [are not wired to process](#) high fructose corn syrup the way we might other forms of sugar. Still, not every kid we pulled had a sweet tooth.

[in tape] What is your favorite food?

Child 8: Vegetables.

Julia Binswanger: Vegetables? Which vegetable?

Child 8: Broccoli. I eat carrots when I'm playing games.

Julia Binswanger: Why carrots over ice cream or something like that?

Child 8: I don't really eat ice cream because it gives me a freeze brain.

Julia Binswanger: According to the Centers for Disease Control, eating daily fruits and veggies [promotes healthy growth and brain development](#) and helps prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and type two diabetes. The CDC also says that [Latinos are more than twice as likely to have type two diabetes](#) than non-Hispanic whites and are also more likely to develop diabetes at a young age. [39% of Latino adults have high blood pressure](#), and heart disease and cancer are [the top two leading causes of death among Latinos](#). Getting kids to eat healthy is no easy task for any parent. And because food and how we cook and share it is cultural, for Latina mothers, figuring out the best way to feed hungry children can involve an extra layer of nuance.

Melissa Huerta: Okay, what is your favorite food?

Alondra Huerta: From home or anywhere?

Melissa Huerta: I think anywhere.

Julia Binswanger: This is Melissa and Alondra Huerta.

Alondra Huerta: Okay, McDonald's.

Melissa Huerta: Why do you like McDonald's?

Alondra Huerta: Chicken nuggets?

Julia Binswanger: Melissa is a secretary at a middle school. Alondra is her nine-year-old daughter. Melissa is interviewing Alondra at their dining room table.

Melissa Huerta: What do you like chicken nuggets for? Why?

Alondra Huerta: It has chicken? Because there's this really funny joke that I have inside of my mind.

Melissa Huerta: Go ahead. What is it?

Alondra Huerta: Can I tell it? Why are chickens so funny?

Melissa Huerta: Why?

Alondra Huerta: Because.

Julia Binswanger: Melissa was born in Chicago. She and Alondra currently live in Berwyn with Alondra's father and 10-year-old brother, Luis. Berwyn is a suburb right outside of Chicago's West Side. Almost [two-thirds](#) of the town's population is Latino.

Melissa Huerta: Now, from the food that I cook, what do you like the most?

Alondra Huerta: Spaghetti.

Melissa Huerta: Why do you like spaghetti?

Alondra Huerta: Because you put a lot of sauce and when you grab a fork and then you turn it around.

Melissa Huerta: And you twirl the noodles.

Alondra Huerta: And there's one teeny tiny bit left, it has a lot of sauce.

Julia Binswanger: Listening to her daughter's preference for chicken nuggets and spaghetti, Melissa starts to feel a bit sad. Her own experiences with food growing up are much different from Alondra's. Melissa is a first generation American. Her parents are from the city of Iguala, in the state of Guerrero, in Mexico.

- Melissa Huerta: So I was born here in Chicago and when I was three we went to Mexico and I lived there for about maybe three to four years and then came back to the States, and then since then, I've been raised here.
- Julia Binswanger: When Melissa was a kid, she ate mostly home cooked meals.
- Melissa Huerta: We weren't allowed to eat out. It was a treat to eat out, actually. My mom used to cook every day and it was just traditional food, the beans, the rice, the sopa aguada, lentejas, which is lentil soup, caldo de pollo. So it was all homemade food, and you ate enough all together in family at a certain time, and that was the time that everybody had to sit at the table. And we had to make adjustments in our schedule to be at the table at certain times.
- Julia Binswanger: According to the [Family Dinner Project](#), a nonprofit based at Massachusetts General Hospital's Psychiatry Academy that promotes the health benefits of family dinners, home-cooked family meals are on the decline. [In a 2013 poll](#) by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, almost half of families found it difficult to eat family meals together. The Family Dinner Project also cites research linking regular family meals with higher grade point averages, higher self-esteem and lower rates of teen pregnancy, eating disorders and depression. In Melissa's family, it's difficult to get everyone around the table for a home cooked meal.
- Melissa Huerta: It's sad to say, but it's convenient that I can just pop something in the microwave, give them what they need and at least keep them fed. And I do always have fruit available for them. My son loves watermelon, so we have to have watermelon, but now that it's more accessible to have processed foods or the fast food restaurants, just hop out on the car and just go get it and it's convenient. You don't have to take an hour or two to do the cooking. They do have their pizza, their nuggets, as well.
- Julia Binswanger: Melissa says she and her husband have full-time jobs and work long hours, so they have frozen food and drive-through meals quite often. She's not alone. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that in the last 50 years, [the number of households with two working parents has doubled](#). The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that in 2022, [nearly two-thirds of households](#) with married couple families have two parents in the workforce. A 2018 report from the Hispanic Research Center found that most Latino children in low income households [have at least one employed parent](#), but the jobs their parents are doing earn meager wages and have irregular work schedules, limiting the resources parents have for their children, financial and otherwise. And when Melissa does cook at home:
- Melissa Huerta: I try to cook our traditional pozole, our traditional enchiladas, but their taste buds are different, I guess.

- Julia Binswanger: She says Alondra and Luis can be picky eaters. They don't always want traditional Mexican meals. [Pozole is a hardy stew](#) invented by the Aztecs that's made with hominy, chili, often a meat like pork or chicken, and comes with add-ons like shredded cabbage, onion, radish, and some lime and avocado.
- Melissa Huerta: She likes it. She can go ahead and try different types of food, but on the other hand, my son is just like, "No, I want a burger, but it has to be just a plain burger with just ketchup and mustard." And she might have the enchilada with cheese and sour cream. And I think they're growing in a totally different, I say, era because I ate traditional foods. Like I mentioned before, it was the beans, enchiladas, the pozole, the menudo, and they don't like it for some reason. They just don't go for it.
- Alondra Huerta: I can't believe that you just said I do not like pozole.
- Melissa Huerta: Well, I was just... Yeah, she does. Sorry, she does like pozole. That's one of the things that she asks my mom to cook a lot for her.
- Alondra Huerta: Oh, yeah. My brother's the picky eater. He's picky about stuff.
- Julia Binswanger: These changes that Melissa talks about, the shift away from family dinners, the convenience of takeout and microwavable foods, are all prevalent across the US. A 2021 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that [ultra processed foods make up 67% of the calories](#) that kids and teens eat. In a [2023 interview with NPR](#), the study's author Dr. Fang Fang Zhang noted that research links eating a high consumption of ultra processed foods to detrimental health outcomes in adults, such as a higher risk of high blood pressure, type two diabetes and some cancers. For Latina moms like Melissa, there's an additional cultural weight, the shift in taste buds. Cooking can be an expression of love and of a shared identity. Making pozole for her children is a way to pass down her Mexican heritage.
- Melissa Huerta: Trying to keep our culture still alive. I like to speak to them in Spanish a lot and also just bring the traditional foods that we normally have, but it's really hard when they're used to something different. In school, it's nothing but processed foods. When they hop the car on their drive from the babysitter to here, they have a cold sandwich, so by the time they're home, they'll have a snack and by the time it's dinnertime, they're not hungry so they don't want to eat. So it gets a little hard.
- Julia Binswanger: Chicago is home to [many Latino neighborhoods](#), including Little Village, Humboldt Park, Logan Square, and Pilsen, neighborhoods that are overflowing with Latino music, art festivals and tasty bites, neighborhoods where folks speak Spanish and Aztec murals decorate train platforms. [A fifth of Berwyn's residents](#) where Melissa and her family live were born in Mexico. 27-year-old Samantha Martinez co-founded [the Gage Park Latinx Council](#).

- Samantha Martinez: We are a grassroots organization and a cultural center that opened in 2018 in Gage Park with a mission to create programming and opportunities for young people from Gage Park, and to also spread awareness around food insecurity and wellness.
- Julia Binswanger: 90% of people living in Gage Park are Latino. It's a predominantly immigrant and working class neighborhood. The Gage Park Latinx Council [highlights](#) how the neighborhood has dealt with disinvestment, struggling with a lack of green public spaces, as well as healthy and affordable grocery stores. The center is a small building with a brick facade. It's in a residential area on West 51st, a commercial street with a barber shop, a daycare, some food joints and doctor's offices. A brightly colored mural of a dragon decorates the side of the building and at the top, a progress pride flag waves in the wind. The center itself is quiet, with the exception of passing buses and cars outside. This is a place where people can gather and talk about shared experiences and difficulties. Like, say, working long hours and not having the time to cook the traditional meals one would like to.
- Samantha Martinez: A lot of immigrant folks are consistently surviving. Their lives revolve around sustaining their families and working long hours. I'm an immigrant myself, so I think what I noticed in my family, at least, is that there was a huge disconnection with food during the week. And then on the weekends was when my parents had more time on their hands to actually cook meals that reminded them of home.
- Julia Binswanger: In 2017, Prosperity Now, a public policy think tank focused on low income families, [published a report](#) stating that the median annual income for a Latino in Chicago is [42% lower than that of a non-Hispanic white person](#). Samantha is also from the Mexican state of Guerrero, and like Melissa, she experienced some culture shock when she first came to the United States as a young girl.
- Samantha Martinez: I'm from a small town called Buenavista de Cuéllar, it's like a small town in between the mountains. So I grew up in a space where you would just have to walk a couple of minutes to get to the tianguis and at the tianguis you basically have different people selling just fresh items that they either that they grew in their land or that they were bringing from the nearest city.
- Julia Binswanger: Samantha left Mexico when she was six-years-old, like Melissa growing up, most of her meals were homemade. She recalls having her first meal in the United States.
- Samantha Martinez: I remember that my palate felt different. I was like, "Oh, this is a new flavor. I hadn't tasted this before." So I noticed how there were other ingredients here that were being used or other ways to access food, whereas in my town we had very few restaurants, so majority of the time since mothers stayed at home, while the dads went off to work, the moms were in charge of cooking every day a meal for their families.

- Julia Binswanger: According to [a 2018 Penn State study](#), immigrants who arrived as children between ages two and 11 had less healthy diets than their adult counterparts. The researchers defined a healthy diet by center for nutrition policy and promotion guidelines and basically measured if people were taking in recommended amounts of fruits, veggies, whole grains, et cetera. The study observed that immigrant children may be particularly susceptible to adopting unhealthy eating behaviors from the US, such as drinking soda and snacking on processed foods due to the fact that often both of their parents work and have less time to cook.
- Samantha Martinez: One of the things that is often unspoken when it comes to children of immigrants or even immigrant children is that food can become a way in which they can cope with their emotions. And so it makes me think about the fact that, when I was younger, me and my sister, we had food at home, but it wasn't always the healthiest of food.
- Julia Binswanger: As a child, Samantha would turn to junk food to relieve her stress or uncomfortable feelings. This is called emotional eating, overeating to cope with emotions, often negative ones.
- Samantha Martinez: But it became a comfort sometimes, especially on harder days when we would miss home because we were dealing with so many changes in such a short amount of time. And I think now that I have an awareness, now that I'm in my adult years, I realize that that's not something that was openly talked about.
- Julia Binswanger: Talking openly about food and nutrition and providing support to working families is a goal of her organization. The effects of emotional eating on Latino populations are, in fact, not well-documented. [A 2021 study published in the journal Eating Behaviors](#) found that to the best of their knowledge, there is no research focused on Latino adolescents that examines the effect of stress on emotional eating or diet. This is the case, even though 2020 census data showed that [more than one in four youth in the US under 18 is Latino](#), and as young Latina girls grow into teenagers, relationships to food and nutrition get even more complicated.
- In the spring of 2023, Alondra celebrated her ninth birthday. As a family, they went to Niagara Falls, the Canada side.
- Melissa Huerta: It was on our bucket list. We have a little bucket list going on and one of the places that we wanted to visit was the Niagara Falls. So it just happened that it was on a holiday weekend, and my husband and I were like, "You want to go?" And I'm like, "Road trip." So we just decided... The kids were excited about it. We hopped in the car and we just drove to the Niagara Falls.
- Alondra Huerta: I went on the cruise at the Niagara Falls.
- Melissa Huerta: The little boat cruise?

Alondra Huerta: Yeah, the little boat cruise that we can get close to the waterfalls. And when we went to our five star hotel, and out the window, we saw the Niagara Falls changing colors and saw fireworks.

Julia Binswanger: They also had a separate birthday party at home in Berwyn.

Alondra Huerta: Okay, so my birthday party, we had a trampoline in the front, so that's where we were technically spending the whole entire time.

Melissa Huerta: Do you remember what food we had?

Alondra Huerta: Okay, well, we had a bunch of different types of food, but the common foods that we normally ate was pizza from Little Caesars, and my dad had to order a taco truck or a taco place to come and cook for us.

Julia Binswanger: Melissa sent me a video of the party. In it, Alondra is surrounded by a ton of other kids at a table with a colorful happy birthday banner and rainbow streamers in the background. She wears a floral dress, poses for the camera, and smiles. In front of her is a large cake with yellow frosting and rainbow candles. "Feliz Cumpleaños Alondra" is written on it in icing. She takes a big knife and begins to cut a slice.

At the time of our conversation, Alondra had been nine years old for a total of three weeks. I asked her what it feels like to be nine.

[in tape] Does it feel different from eight?

Alondra Huerta: Yeah.

Julia Binswanger: Okay. How so?

Alondra Huerta: Because I feel taller.

Julia Binswanger: Is that it?

Alondra Huerta: Yeah.

Melissa Huerta: That's good. Okay.

Julia Binswanger: Alondra may not admit to feeling much change, but Melissa has noticed that her daughter is starting to care more about her appearance as she gets older. Alondra proudly shares that she did her own nails and shows off some fun, slightly messy pink acrylics. Her mom says she's also starting to think more about her clothes and how they fit.

Melissa Huerta: Actually, we just went shopping yesterday because we're going to have a quinceanera, and I think as she's growing, "Mom, does this look good on me? Do

I look too big? Do I look too small?" And it's a concern right now for her looking small, looking big, and it's like, you shouldn't be worrying about that. That shouldn't be a concern. That shouldn't even be crossing your mind right now. As she's growing, she is thinking about, does this look good on me? "Am I going to rock this dress", like she says? And it scares me too. It scares me because I tell her, "You know what? You should never feel in a way where you don't want to put something on because you feel that you're too big or you're not going to be able to look good in it." Everything is going to look good on you if you just love yourself and your body, and we have to accept ourselves just like we are, right?

Julia Binswanger: Talking with young girls about their weight is sensitive. A 2020 study from the Chicago Department of Public Health says that Latino students in Chicago Public Schools are [significantly more likely to be overweight](#) or have obesity than other groups. Latino kindergartners in Chicago Public Schools had an average overweight or obesity rate of nearly 39%. By ninth grade, that rate climbs almost 10 percentage points to nearly 49%. In the United States, there is often a premium on looking thin, literally. A 2010 study from the Journal of Applied Psychology estimated that for women in the US, [gaining 25 pounds meant that they'd lose a predicted \\$15,000 annually](#). This is a conversation body positivity advocate [Virgie Tovar](#) has been engaged in for over 10 years.

Virgie Tovar: The BMI was set up for European male bodies. They were not set up for anybody else's bodies.

Julia Binswanger: Virgie is also an author lecturer, an expert on weight-based discrimination and body image issues. She has a master's degree in sexuality studies, focusing on the intersections of body size, race and gender. She's talking about [body mass index or BMI](#), a formula that takes a person's weight and divides it by their height to calculate their body fat. Doctors often use it to track children's growth and determine what is a "healthy weight." Many critics like Virgie [say this measurement is problematic](#). BMI doesn't factor in age, sex, ethnicity, muscle mass or the different types of fat on the body, but it's used to create a standard measurement for obesity. The World Health Organization [says](#) a BMI over 25 is considered overweight and one over 30 is considered obese.

Virgie Tovar: A I work with people who are affected by weight discrimination and I work with them on body image and their relationship to food.

Julia Binswanger: Virgie deliberately uses the word fat throughout our conversation. For her, that term is simply a neutral way to describe a larger body.

Virgie Tovar: I want to get really personal here and speak about being a fat kid.

Julia Binswanger: When she was a kid, Virgie didn't think about the fat on her body as something negative.

- Virgie Tovar: When I was a little girl, I used to love to jiggle. I used to love to take off all my clothes. I would come home from school or from wherever or I guess at that time I wasn't in school yet, but maybe preschool or something, and I would take off all my clothes and I would spread out my arms and legs like a starfish and I would jiggle all over and it just felt... I remember the sensation of it was so pleasurable and so thrilling and just so euphoric.
- Julia Binswanger: Virgie was born in San Francisco, and is still based in California. Like Samantha and Melissa, she comes from a family of Mexican immigrants.
- Virgie Tovar: I look like my ancestors. When I look at my grandma, my great-grandma or all my family, I look like them and my great-grandfather, I've seen pictures of him. He is clearly indigenous. He has a totally different body type than the European ideal. He is short and solid.
- Julia Binswanger: Young Virgie's relationship with her body didn't stay positive for very long.
- Virgie Tovar: By the age of five, I'm introduced to fat phobia at school and I am horrified by my body. There is no more euphoria. There is no more jiggling. There is no more comfort. There is no more sense that my body belongs to me.
- Julia Binswanger: Virgie says pressure from family and peers to focus on eating and nutrition actually caused her to develop unhealthy behaviors around food, like this idea from her mom.
- Virgie Tovar: I remember we were having this conversation where she was like, "Well, the key to losing weight is to learn to hate the foods that you love the most. So you make a list of all the foods you love and then you eat each of them until you throw up and then you grow an aversion to them."
- Julia Binswanger: Virgie says this way of thinking affected her for years.
- Virgie Tovar: When I think about how much fatphobia has taken from, not just me, but my family, and yes, we're immigrants, and yes, we're Mexican, and yes, this happens to us. It's not just white girls who are 14 and a size zero or whatever. It's also people like me. It's also people who look like me.
- Julia Binswanger: Virgie wants people to understand that anyone can be struggling with fat phobia and with an eating disorder. She doesn't want people affected to get overlooked because they look a certain way. And for Virgie, the way she was treated because of her weight greatly affected her mental health.
- Virgie Tovar: I used to have fantasies of waking up in the middle of the night while my parents were asleep and picking out the biggest knife they had and cutting off all my fat and hoping that I survived because I really thought that that was better than how I was living. I was being tortured day in and day out from my weight, mostly

by boys my age at school, and it was incessant. It was nonstop. And so I think about a lot of kids. Not every kid has my experience, a lot of them do.

Julia Binswanger: [A 2009 study from academics at Harvard and Wesleyan universities](#) shows that research on disordered eating primarily examines young, relatively affluent white female populations. According to the study, existing research showed higher rates of eating disorder symptoms among Latino groups than their non-Latino white peers. Some studies found that high school aged Latina girls had "a higher and more severe prevalence of binge-eating than any other group, as well as a higher use of laxatives or diuretics and other unhealthy weight controlling behaviors." But still, when it comes to eating disorders in Latino communities, the information is severely lacking. In report of their studies from 2000, 2010 and 2020, the International Journal of Eating Disorders found that [white participants make up approximately 70% of their samples](#) studied that reported race and ethnicity. Hispanic participants only made up around 10%. In 2021, Latinos made up almost 20% of the US population.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: Then you can start having kids that decide, "Oh, I'm not going to eat."

Julia Binswanger: That's [Dr. Elizabeth Reinhardt](#). Originally from Columbia, she's a pediatrician at [Esperanza Health Center](#) and mostly works with Latino patients. Esperanza opened its first clinic in 2004 in response to the lack of healthcare options and services in Pilsen and Little Village, predominantly Latino neighborhoods in Chicago. Now it operates in five sites across Chicago's Southwest side, delivering bilingual care and services to over 50,000 patients. Dr. Reinhardt has nine years of experience working with kids and her main medical interests are childhood obesity and early childhood development.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: I have had way too many kids that gained a lot of weight during the pandemic and then they realized they were really big and then they started going into eating disorder habits. I have seen in the last year way too many kids with anorexia and bulimia and other type of eating disorders.

Julia Binswanger: In 2021, the New York Times published an article detailing [the dramatic rise in eating disorders among teenagers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). According to the times, the call volume to the National Eating Disorder hotline increased by 40% in the year after the pandemic started. The same time Dr. Reinhardt started observing a rise in eating disorders among her patients. She says what she hears from these kids about how they feel saddens her.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: Their mental perspective on this is, I have to do everything I can to lose the weight because I'm fat and I'm ugly and nobody's going to like me, and it starts a very unhealthy trend in that aspect.

Julia Binswanger: [A 2019 study from researchers at the University of North Carolina](#) found that Latinas in their small sample size were less likely than other ethnic groups to seek medical treatment for eating disorders and also more likely to drop out of

treatment if they get it, but they were more likely to stick with their treatment when family members were a part of it. Research shows that [early identification and intervention are incredibly valuable tools](#) in treating an eating disorder. Parents who are concerned about their teen's behavior should reach out to their pediatrician or family doctor for an evaluation. There's also a lot of helpful information online at nationaleatingdisorders.org. Dr. Reinhardt says that doctors have to be incredibly sensitive when having conversations with kids about healthy eating. Her approach to assessing their health is very different from how children are evaluating their own bodies.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: It's not about how you look. It's about what's happening with your body, and we are going to try to make you as healthy as you can.

Julia Binswanger: Dr. Reinhardt does not want her patients to focus on appearance, but on making sure their body is healthy.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: So I can have a girl that is 180, 200 and some pounds, but her sugar levels are fine. Her cholesterol, her blood pressure is fine. She's exercising. She's making good healthy decisions in her diet. Her family's all big. I'm not as concerned for that kid as I would be of another kid that I see that might be in the overweight range, but already has prediabetes, already has high blood pressure, so it's not too much about how much fat you have, but all the other comorbidities around that. And as well, what is happening with your family? Is your family easily tend to be bigger? So most likely those kids are going to be bigger.

Julia Binswanger: When she was a kid, Virgie had extreme fantasies about shedding fat, but her thinking shifted when she was in her twenties, she started dating someone who loved her body.

Virgie Tovar: I really had believed that no one would ever love me completely, that they would be like, "Okay, you're really smart and you're funny and I'll accept your body because I love you and your soul so much." That was what fat phobia taught me, and he was the first partner who was like, "You're the whole package. You are sexy and beautiful, and you're all those other things."

Julia Binswanger: Virgie wants people to understand how hard it can be for certain people to lose weight. Studies show that proper nutrition and movement doesn't always equate to weight loss. Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, an obesity specialist and professor of medicine and pediatrics at Harvard Medical School believes that notions around calorie counting are extremely antiquated. In an article in Harvard Health Publishing, she claims that [bodies have a set point that controls and maintains weight](#). This set point reflects several factors, some in our control, some not, like genes, environment and one's behaviors. According to Dr. Stanford, 96% of people who lose a large amount of weight, regain it. Virgie feels many doctors are missing the mark when it comes to their fat patients. She believes in an idea that has gained popularity in the last decade that fat people shouldn't have to worry about losing weight. Instead, they should embrace and accept it. It's a lesson she's learned from other fat activists.

Virgie Tovar: They taught me there was nothing wrong with me, and they taught me that my body was amazing and was capable of all these incredible things and that I did not have to diet or try to change my body size anymore. They were like, "It's great that you're fat and we should celebrate that you're fat." And I think the joy really began in the creative pursuit of living with that, and I think when living with that truth and accepting that truth and believing that truth, and then doing whatever I could to help as many people to get there too if they wanted to get there.

Julia Binswanger: Conversations around fat and weight and the link between fat and nutrition are far from straightforward, especially in Latino communities where there's pressure to follow European beauty standards, especially for women. But things are changing, especially in how the US medical community addresses weight and its impact on ethnic groups. In January 2023, [the American Academy of Pediatrics](#) or AAP released [new guidelines](#) for understanding weight and obesity in children. They suggest that obesity should no longer be stigmatized as simply the result of personal choices. Being affected by obesity has been previously thought of as being in a patient's control or even something they're at fault for. The new guidelines encourage thinking about obesity more as a "complex disease." This new AAP approach factors in [social determinants of health](#), the environmental conditions that affect health, factors like income, healthcare access, racism, and the quality of food at nearby grocery stores.

According to the World Health Organization, studies show that social determinants of health account for between [30% to 55% of health outcomes](#). Dr. Reinhardt feels positive about the guideline changes. She believes they provide a more complete way to view a complex issue. The AAP even calls for policy changes that address issues like structural racism, the marketing of unhealthy food and household food insecurity.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: When I read them, I was excited to see that they are taking a bigger approach to obesity because obesity has always been in the category of calories in, calories out. Now we know for sure there is way more to obesity than calories in, calories out, that that was pretty much the old perspective. So I was very happy to see how the American Academy of Pediatrics is taking into account the whole person, the genetics, where they live, race. All this stuff is extremely important to being able to address somebody in a holistic perspective on what's happening with obesity.

Julia Binswanger: In addition to reexamining ideas around why people have obesity, the AAP guidelines advocate for a comprehensive obesity treatment. Their recommendations range from support and nutrition and physical activity to behavioral therapy, medication and surgery. For Virgie, however, the guidelines are still missing the mark. She agrees that being fat shouldn't be thought of as a result of merely personal choices, but she's also critical of the term obesity. She says it's discriminatory and misleading. To her, being fat and having a high body mass index isn't a "complex disease."

- Virgie Tovar: These guidelines, in my opinion, are extremely dangerous to brown children, in particular, to BIPOC children, in particular. The medical field does not have a great history when it comes to race, gender, size, et cetera.
- Julia Binswanger: One of the AAP guidelines, main recommendations to treat children with obesity is referral to an intensive health behavior and lifestyle treatment program, or IHBLT. IHBLT is demanding both of the patient's time and financial resources. The treatment is most effective in people with the whole family present and 26 hours of nutrition, physical activity and behavior change lessons over the course of three to 12 months. Unfortunately, many insurance companies [don't cover this treatment](#), and according to a 2021 report from the US Census Bureau, Latinos are [among the highest uninsured populations in the country](#). Just over 17% of Latinos are uninsured. What's more, according to Kids Eat in Color, a nonprofit dedicated to childhood nutrition, [there is very little follow-up information](#) available beyond a year after IHBLT is completed, so the long-term success of the treatment is unclear.
- Another treatment suggestion from the new AAP guidelines is to prescribe weight loss medication to children with obesity ages 12 and older, like [Wegovy](#) or the diabetes drug that has become its unapproved substitute Ozempic, and in some cases, metabolic and bariatric weight loss surgery. Weight loss meds and bariatric surgery can help some patients manage health issues like high blood pressure and pre-diabetes.
- A 2018 study from researchers at Harvard Medical School states that Hispanic adults in the US have an [80% higher rate of diabetes](#) than non-Hispanic whites. Pre-diabetes and high blood pressure in kids can lead to serious health issues later in life, such as type two diabetes, strokes, heart attacks, heart failure, and kidney disease. The medications, however, also come with [side effects](#) like diarrhea, vomiting, constipation, and stomach pain. [The side effects for bariatric surgery are severe](#): bleeding, infection, chronic nausea, and inability to eat certain foods, and it doesn't actually promise consistent weight loss. In fact, you can gain weight. What's more if the surgery isn't reversible? Here's Virgie.
- Virgie Tovar: I think that it's important to ask questions and to really dive into, if you can, look up the phrase long-term impacts weight loss surgery. Look up information about what Ozempic and all these drugs do. Be a proactive patient and model that for your child.
- Julia Binswanger: But Dr. Reinhardt believes these drugs and the surgery could help young patients in serious need.
- Elizabeth Reinhardt: There is a drug that I use with some kids that is metformin, that is a drug for diabetes. It helps with regulating their metabolism. It helps with decreasing a little bit of weight, not too much, but just regulating how your body reacts to insulin. So when you understand all the endocrinologic aspects of obesity, you realize that all those medications like Wegovy, Ozempic, can actually have a very

good impact in lowering your high blood sugars and how your body uses insulin and uses sugar.

Julia Binswanger: She believes side effects should be monitored, but shouldn't scare off patients from considering the options.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: But side effects are about 15% of the people and some people need to come out of it. Some people just handle the side effects, as any medication.

Julia Binswanger: And ultimately, she's thinking of a child's risk of long-term health problems from something like diabetes, which can be linked to weight.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: The benefits outweigh the risk in this situation. Diabetes in kids is way more dangerous than if you get diabetes when you're an adult. The high risk of a cardiovascular event, the high risk of pretty much heart attacks and strokes, those people can really have a really difficult life and shortened lifespan.

Julia Binswanger: Of course, Dr. Reinhardt says that she talks about nutrition with her patients' families, but that it's much more complicated than telling them to simply put healthy foods, like veggies, in front of their kids.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: It's mostly that when they buy them, then the kids don't eat it, so they just go bad and they prefer to eat the junk than to eat the healthy foods. So we try to make a plan of, "Oh, okay, what are we going to buy? What are we going to do with this?"

Julia Binswanger: [Priya Fielding-Singh](#), a researcher who studies food inequality wrote about something similar in her book, [How the Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America](#). She found that the problem wasn't knowledge. The low income parents she talked to had a solid understanding of what was and wasn't healthy. Instead, parents with fewer resources tend to buy less expensive, less healthy food to maximize the amount of food they can give their kids, and also parents give their children processed food because [it's a treat they can afford](#). It's something that their kids ask for that they can say yes to, when so often their tight budgets force them to say no. Here's Dr. Reinhardt again.

Elizabeth Reinhardt: I hear a lot about how the kids start complaining to their moms and say, "You don't love me. Why are you being so mean to me? I want to eat this." And you don't have this at home. So tell them like, "Okay, next time they say that, tell them to call me." And we talk. They don't.

Julia Binswanger: For her, the AAP guidelines ultimately offer new tools and solutions to a complicated issue. For her part, Virgie believes the side effects for weight loss medication or surgery are incredibly serious and unethical to recommend to minors.

Virgie Tovar: In my opinion, weight loss surgery is an unnecessary ineffective and barbaric surgery, and it should absolutely not be done on children who cannot consent to it and don't understand the scope.

Julia Binswanger: Virgie doesn't believe that being fat should automatically mean a child will get diabetes or have high blood pressure. She says these are also health issues that people who aren't fat can have, and a patient isn't unhealthy just because they're fat. Her concern is focused on how discrimination against fat people can affect mental health and physical wellbeing. The American Psychological Association says that like other types of bias, weight discrimination and stigma [increases a person's risk for mental health issues](#), including substance use, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Medical professionals will also often provide these patients with lower quality of care, overlooking or dismissing symptoms due to the patient's weight and causing long-term health issues to go untreated.

Virgie Tovar: The solution has to be that we accept that body diversity is real, that there is no such thing as one body that is the ideal body. We have to create a society where weight discrimination is not affecting the outcomes in such a way that we can't differentiate the health outcomes from the discrimination outcomes.

Julia Binswanger: Although the guidelines note that obesity is often due to factors outside of an individual's control, the recommendations requiring medication or surgery are all at the individual patient level. The guidelines do not offer sustainable solutions to improve nutrition on the community level, besides encouraging policies that could tackle social determinants of health. Back at the Huerta household, Melissa asks Alondra what she likes about school lunches.

Melissa Huerta: How do your meals at home differ from what you get in school?

Alondra Huerta: Okay, so there's a hot dog at school. It's very salty at school.

Melissa Huerta: Do you like it?

Alondra Huerta: No, it's very salty. And here they make it nice and crunchy.

Melissa Huerta: Crunchy, toasted, a little burned.

Alondra Huerta: Yeah, a little burned and toasted.

Julia Binswanger: [Chicago Public Schools](#) offers free breakfast and lunch to all students. For many families, those meals are a reliable way to keep bellies full. In the 2022-2023 school year, Latino children made up [the largest population](#) of Chicago Public School students, nearly half at 46.5%. Chicago Public Schools has [nutrition guidelines on its website](#) about its commitment to healthy, high quality food and detailing the fruits, veggies, and proteins it provides. Still, not everyone feels those lunches are the healthiest. In 2022, Aramark, a large American food manufacturer, renewed his contract with CPS as a part of an [\\$88.5 million deal](#)

to continue providing school lunches across the city's public schools. Critics of Aramark believed the company prioritizes low costs over food quality.

[LWC Studio's original audio documentary series Left Over](#) details how much CPS relies on prepackaged and highly processed food. When we reached out to CPS for comment, [they said in a statement](#), "Our meals meet or exceed the nutrition standards outlined by the United States Department of Agriculture, ensuring that menu items limit sodium, fat, and calories, as well as provide minimum servings for fruits and vegetables. Ensuring students are healthy, not hungry is essential to setting them up to succeed both inside and outside the classroom." The primary issue here is that so many Latino families depend on school meals to provide daily nutrition for their children. According to [the Greater Chicago Food Depository](#), a food bank and nonprofit, food insecurity affects nearly one-third of Chicago's Latinos. [Food insecurity](#) happens when a person does not have access to healthy foods that sustain and meet their basic needs.

- Emily Reyes: I work in a middle school with growing kids and the school included lunch is a slice of pizza, carrots, there's healthy options, but the quantity is much smaller than what I noticed my own children would be eating at home, so I think that's one thing. It's great that it's an option, but it's not quite enough.
- Julia Binswanger: That's Emily Reyes, a school social worker at Freedom Middle School in Berwyn South School District 100, where Melissa works as a secretary. According to the state's [2020 report card](#), more than two-thirds of students in the district are eligible for free and reduced priced lunch, and 84% of the student body at Berwyn Schools is Latino.
- Emily Reyes: And we have a lot of students that rely on that. In my middle school, there's just a handful of kids that bring lunch from home.
- Julia Binswanger: In her spare time to supplement the diet her students get at school, Emily also runs the Despensa program in partnership with [Beyond Hunger](#), a nonprofit organization in Chicago that focuses on solving food insecurity. With Beyond Hunger, the Despensa program provides families with a monthly supply of culturally familiar groceries. Despensa means pantry in Spanish, and their care packages include quality meats, as well as fresh produce. [Michele Zurakowski](#) is the CEO of Beyond Hunger.
- Michele Zurakowski: What we decided to do with Emily is just collaborate with that group and provide some more food, some more fresh produce, some culturally specific foods, tortillas and the like to try to bolster that amount and just make it ongoing.
- Julia Binswanger: One thing that makes the Despensa food pantry program different is that people don't have to provide identification to participate. This gets rid of stigma families might feel in reaching out for help and red tape that makes it difficult to serve those who are in need.

- Michele Zurakowski: We did away with the identification requirement, and so at this point, we're now serving 130 families a month during the regular months, and then we go up to 150 during November and December because obviously that's a time of critical need.
- Julia Binswanger: According to Michele, the winter holidays add extra expenses to already tight family budgets. At the beginning of the pandemic, child hunger spiked as school shut down. After the introduction of monthly child tax credit payments, however, child hunger actually [went down by about 20% from 2020 to 2021](#). These payments [expired in December 2021](#). Emily began the Dispensa program at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Emily Reyes: When schools shut down, as a school social worker, we saw the immediate need that families were experiencing in terms of their kids up until that point, were able to go to school and get at least two of their meals each day taken care of. And so we had a lot of families that were then needing that gap filled.
- Julia Binswanger: Although Berwyn South District 100 allowed families to come take a grab and go breakfast and lunch, according to Emily, this only occurred at certain schools during specific hours, and due to transportation issues and varying work schedules, [not every family could access the service](#). Emily gathered a group of social workers and community members to create care packages full of fresh foods and canned goods to serve a few families in Berwyn, things like rice beans, cooking oils, chicken bouillon.
- Emily Reyes: And it started with maybe 20 families and by the end, we were getting more and more families each week.
- Julia Binswanger: Before Emily began the Dispensa program, her zip code in Berwyn had very limited access to Beyond Hunger's pantries.
- Emily Reyes: Since we've been doing the Dispensa, we are now the highest or one of the highest zip codes, which, to me, was a huge testament to just by meeting the needs of a community, a really basic need and showing that there was trust there.
- Julia Binswanger: The Gage Park Latinx Community Council began a similar free community food distribution program at the beginning of the pandemic called [El Mercadito, or "the little market"](#).
- Samantha Martinez: We started off giving out food boxes around Gage parks primarily and parking lots, so we did food popups. And the intention there was to connect people who did not have access to nutritious food.
- Julia Binswanger: I went to visit the market at the center on a Thursday in May 2023. The line span the length of the entire block. Samantha says over 300 people come to the center for food every month.

- Samantha Martinez: And so when we look at that, we see that there's only two larger markets in the community. We started hearing that people wanted access to fresh food like tomatoes. So typically what we give out during our food distribution hours are fresh items, a combination of fresh and dry items. Usually we give out potatoes, tomatoes, oranges, apples, and then the dry goods tend to be oatmeal, cereals, pastas. But I think it also started a conversation with people around why food is so expensive, where are we sourcing our food? And it really also opened up to talking about who has access to afford fresh produce versus who doesn't.
- Julia Binswanger: [Cedillo's Fresh Produce](#) began production in 2017.
- Dulce Morales: My name is Dulce Morales. I am co-founder of Cedillo's Fresh Produce and this is where we are right now. It's a quarter of an acre farm in Englewood.
- Julia Binswanger: It smells like fresh soil as Dulce waters incoming seedlings by the farm's greenhouse. It's calm on the farm and birds chirp softly from the trees. Behind the farm, the metro train will occasionally zoom by, reminder that we're still in the middle of Englewood. Englewood is a neighborhood on the city's south side. [Many consider it a food desert](#). Food deserts are areas with few to no convenient options to access affordable, healthy food. Activists also call this [food apartheid](#) to underscore the lack of fresh food is due to systemic racism. A Whole Foods in Englewood, which closed last year, [was replaced by a Save-A-Lot](#) last May. Like Gage Park where Samantha operates the Latinx Council, the community in Englewood has suffered from disinvestment, but residents are working to reverse that trend. Dulce runs her small family farm with her husband, Juan Cedillo. It's a safe space for people in the community to come and gather. The farm offers [free weekly delivery](#) of fresh produce to neighboring south side areas.
- Dulce Morales: We have brought this space. We feel that we are collaborating or giving to the community by having the community garden across the street, which is free access to everybody. We do encourage for them to come and help, but in reality, it's just us running the community garden. Everything that you see growing here is part of that is going over there. And we service minority communities like Back of the Yards and Little Village communities. So most of our stuff, 80% of our stuff goes there.
- Julia Binswanger: Part of Cedillo's farm's mission is to educate children about healthy foods and healthy eating. Kids especially may not know a lot about farming, like Alondra.
- Melissa Huerta: Where do you think the foods you eat comes from?
- Alondra Huerta: Normally you buy them from... So when you make spaghetti, you get the sauce from a can and the spaghetti box.
- Julia Binswanger: Dulce say hopes to give kids more opportunities to connect to the food on their plate, to the land where it's harvested. She believes this can help kids develop a

better attitude toward healthy eating. Having kids learn, play and work with fresh produce can get them excited about non-processed foods that come straight from the ground. As she's talking about this, she keeps watering the garden.

Dulce Morales: Educating kids has been definitely part of our business since day one because we have a child, so we incorporate that. We also had a field trip from second-graders come here two weeks ago, and there were three classes, and it was just amazing how these little kids were weeding and learning about the different weeds and painting with the different leaves that they were able to find. And they were seeding and they were learning more about the chickens and seeing if there was a rooster where they lay their eggs. Definitely one of the things that we always make sure is that we have some kind of education for the children since they're little till they're very adult seniors. We are able to open up a space for anyone.

Julia Binswanger: Dulce has created such a safe community space that people even bring their babies and let them crawl away through the vegetable beds.

Dulce Morales: We all need to make sure that we are in touch with nature, and if we don't have these types of spaces, how are we going to be able to do that? So we're very grateful to have this type of space to provide to everyone.

Julia Binswanger: When we focus on food, oftentimes we think about our individual eating habits and not the ways we eat as a community. Organizations like Beyond Hunger, the Gage Park Latinx Council and Cedillo's farm are sustainable community-based efforts to provide residents with healthier food options. Back in Berwyn, Alondra is doing what so many second and third generation kids do in the kitchen, find ways to take ownership of ingredients and culinary tastes from all the cultures they're a part of.

Melissa Huerta: Do you want to tell us what chamoy is?

Alondra Huerta: Chamoy is-

Melissa Huerta: What's the flavor of the chamoy? Why do you like it so much? Or why do you like Tajin so much?

Alondra Huerta: Okay, so they're almost the same, but Tajin is a powder.

Melissa Huerta: Okay. Is it spicy? Is it salty?

Alondra Huerta: Okay, so it's sweet and also sour. I make my secret ingredients.

Melissa Huerta: You want to tell us what your secret ingredients is?

Alondra Huerta: Okay, so I put it on my other plate, but I cut cucumbers, I add lemon, I add Tajin, and also a teensy bit of salt and chamoy.

Julia Binswanger: Listening to Alondra, I can't help but appreciate the unfettered joy in her voice whenever she talks about food, like how the reason she likes McDonald's chicken nuggets is not only because they're salty and crispy, but also because they remind her of a good joke or how she likes spaghetti because it's fun twirling noodles with a fork. And though we've just gone through all the ways that food and nutrition can be complicated, to her, food is still fun. It should be enjoyed.

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