



140. Helping Kids Make Healthy Food Choices with Rachel Shreve of Cooking with Kids

Rachel Shreve: [00:00:00] Bringing it back to food brings it back to something we all have to do, and this helps us link ourselves to our own humanity, to others.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:10] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, in today's episode, we are going to talk about nutrition, healthy food, kids, families, and hopefully, a love affair that can happen with learning how to eat, cook, and be in a happy and joyous space when it comes to food. And we're going to be talking about a program called Cooking With Kids, which is a nationally recognized nonprofit organization based in Northern New Mexico. Cooking with Kids was founded in 1995, and it educates and empowers children and families to make healthy food choices through hands-on learning with fresh, affordable food.

So, super excited about this particular conversation, because for our listeners, PAST is involved heavily with all kinds of things that tied to agriculture, food, food insecurities, and so we're super excited about that. And joining us today for the conversation is Rachel Shreve, who has been part of Cooking with Kids since 2006, first, as an educator, and most recently, as the Communications Director. She has a passion for cooking and a love of education, and years of teaching hands-on cooking classes with elementary age students, which laid a direct foundation for her current work. So, Rachel, welcome to the program.

Rachel Shreve: [00:01:57] Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:59] Absolutely. So, let's start with just sort of that 100,000-foot view, first and foremost. Gave a little bit of introduction about cooking with kids, but maybe share with our listeners who come from all over the world about sort of the why, the need for this organization, and why in Northern New Mexico, in particular.

Rachel Shreve: [00:02:18] Cooking with Kids exists, because there's a disparity, especially in Northern New Mexico, of food access. There's a disconnect with food. Kids all over the United States and around the world have a disconnect, a growing disconnect with food about where their food comes from, and it's really challenging, especially for families who are dealing with lower incomes to risk trying new foods. They can't afford that risk. You can't afford to spend valuable money on foods that kids may refuse to eat.

And it actually takes quite a few times for kids to be offered a new food for them to accept that food. So, Cooking with Kids exist to help speed up that process. There's also a lot of research behind using hands-on experience with food that helps kids accept that food when they've helped make it, when they've helped wash it, cut it up, cook it. That actually counts as a couple of experiences, and so it speeds up the process of them being willing to accept that food. So, we support those families' efforts to develop healthy eating habits at home.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:24] Yeah. That's really intriguing, because I've had numerous conversations as it relates to food and food insecurities, and how we work and get really, really creative with kiddos in that space. And I think that you're one of the first people that has actually pointed out the economic cost or sort of the components that might hinder that sort of next piece. We always talk about an educational standpoint, that it's easier to get into a habit of unhealthy food, because it's available, it's there, I can use my wick or food stamps if that's necessary for me, all of these sort of host of things.

But I don't think I've ever heard anybody clearly articulate, I think we intuitively know that that's the case, but there's a cost and risk associated with introducing something new to a family that might not be able to afford that. So, I want to, first and foremost, say thank you so much for putting that out there, because I think it's a critically important piece of the conversation.

And then, the second thing I love about this is that recognition that by engaging the kids themselves in that hands-on experience around their food, that it has the potential to be a driver that can create change. So, that's super, super intriguing to me. And I guess the other thing that I want to sort of ask about, because I know that you have several different project components about the way you're tackling this, and we'll sort of dig in a little bit with each of them.

But you were talking about families, so let's just dive in right there, because there are a whole host of barriers as it relates to how families get into sort of the food cycles that they're in. So, are you seeing trends in the Northern New Mexico region, which I do think translates to lots of other places around the world, that relates to based on the trends that you see as the way that you think about or articulate the programs that you design and develop within the programming?

Rachel Shreve: [00:05:16] Well, New Mexico is currently ranked 49th in the nation for child well-being, which that's from the Annie Casey Foundation, and that they track a variety of factors, which include health, education, family income, and 30% of third graders, and this is actually from the New Mexico Department of Health, 30% of third graders are overweight or obese in New Mexico. And 30% actually live in homes that are below the poverty line that are without income to provide adequate food.

And so, we work with a lot of families, our program actually prioritizes schools that have a certain percentage, at least 50% or more of students who qualify for free or reduced price school meals, so we know that we're working with the families that would qualify for SNAP benefits and would be directly impacted by the challenges that families face when trying to choose healthier options.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:25] And the program works directly with these schools and school districts, and you work directly with families, and there's a variety of different ways that you've crafted the programming, so I'd like to talk just a little bit about sort of the ways you're approaching this, because one of the other things that we know in our work is that not only do you have to have multiple exposure opportunities, A, to get a child to try new foods, but anything, quite frankly, it's not just about foods, those multiple sort of touchpoints, but we also know that there has to be multiple sort of opportunities for the child's environment and ecosystem as a whole to also have that same experience, which is one of the things that I like about the fact that you have a

hands-on cooking class, some virtual components, you do these live online family components, as well as work directly with the schools.

So, let's talk about the hands-on cooking class first, and sort of where and how do you sort of structure that? And at the end of the day, one of the things this program is really mindful of is the fact that folks will hear these conversations and they'll sort of think to themselves, well, I really love what I just heard Rachael talking about, how could I do something like that in my community or could I get access to what this existing program is doing in another place and bring it into my community?

And so, as we're sort of thinking about that hands-on cooking class, because cooking classes or home ec, if you will, to use a really, really old school term, but thinking about things that people are familiar with, have been in and around the ecosystems of schools for a really, really long time. So, what makes Cooking with Kids and the way that you're running this program different or unique?

Rachel Shreve: [00:07:57] One of the ways right off the bat is that Cooking with Kids is super embedded in our schools. We are a nonprofit, but we've partnered with schools. We have really wonderful relationships with Santa Fe Public Schools and Espanola Public Schools, which are the working two school districts. And over the years, when I started as an educator, I was on a cart. There's a lot you can do on a cart with a hot plate, and an electric skillet, and a griddle. And you wheel your cart in and you clean all the glitter glue off the tables in the classroom, and you can set up a wash station.

And it's really quite amazing how you can transform a space. But over the years, schools have acknowledged the extreme value that Cooking with Kids brings to their communities. And as remodels have taken place over time, they've actually allotted a space for us. So, either a flex lab, an actual culinary kitchen, I would say, actually, all of our schools at this point have a space that's designated for Cooking with Kids, which is really kind of monumental.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:07] It is. Absolutely. I mean, I just can't underscore that enough. That is absolutely remarkable. So, school district has said, there's so much value not just in this program, but in this nonprofit partner who's providing this programming that we are going to actually solve the space issue tied to doing this effectively. That is truly amazing.

Rachel Shreve: [00:09:24] So much so that, sometimes, families don't realize, I mean, they think we're part of the school, and that's great in some ways and it's not so great in other ways for our fundraising, just the visibility. They're like, oh, you're a school program, you get funding from—there's an assumption about where we get our funding from.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:42] Yeah. And I think that's pretty typical of programs, too, that are successful as they embed inside the school with the work that they're doing. And I know that like most programs around the world, the program was impacted obviously by the pandemic and the things that you were able to do, but now that you're back in the schools and you're doing your sort of piece, I'm super curious, as I think most folks are, there's a lot of conversation during the pandemic about the difficulty of virtual instruction, about the the engagement issues, especially with elementary kiddos, I'm super curious about how you managed to keep the work that you were doing even through that time period alive, to the point that when your kiddos come back and you're with them in the school right now, what did you see in terms of what was going on for kids during that time?

Rachel Shreve: [00:10:32] We definitely had some challenges. I mean, hands on is written right into our mission, so that made it really challenging to say, oh, we're going all virtual. And we worked with pre-kinder all

the way through sixth grade students, and more recently, we had just started a pilot for a middle school food lab, which we discontinued during the virtual year, because we just didn't have the footing yet to establish that. But, one, because of reasons of access, you don't know what kids have at home, and you can't just go, okay, everybody go get an apple. We can't make those kinds of assumptions about what kind of food kids have. And also, just for reasons of safety, kids can't cook on their own.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:16] Yeah, absolutely.

Rachel Shreve: [00:11:18] That's not a thing you could do. So, we have an amazing program director with a deep, very rich background in education, and she's a teacher of teachers, and she developed these amazing food literacy classes that we would do about, who grows our food? Is that a farmer? And talking about, we show a variety of pictures of people that we knew were farmers, and say, which one of these do you think are farmers? Turns out they're all farmers.

And we were able to talk about stereotypes around who does certain kinds of work, and then also, different kinds of food. We talked about soups and stews, and herbs and spices, and different things in the stories about the history of spices. And then, those were supplemented with what we started right at the beginning, right in April of 2020, of these live online family cooking nights, which were really incredible, because right off the bat, our kids, they knew their school educator, and then they were able to come together on a Google Meet or—usually, a Google Meet that schools would host and we would just cook together.

So, at the beginning, we didn't quite have a plan for how to get food to our families, but we worked with schools and we found funding to provide ingredient kits that people could swing by and pick up curbside cooking kits. And then, they would all sign on, and you'd hear little voices pipe up, go, Chef Mariella, "What am I supposed to do with the cheese?" And like, "Which side of the grater am I supposed to use?" And it was just really lovely.

And it was a direct way for grown-ups and kids to work in their own kitchen, and say, "Well, you know what, I can do this in my own kitchen." "If you don't have a juicer, you can ream a lime with a fork." I mean, there are lots of options for how to make this work. A lot of times, families, when we are in the cooking classes in the schools, they'll say, "Well, I don't have this equipment or that, and we were able to have this conversations about, there's a lot of ways you can do this and you don't have to have fancy equipment to cook.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:29] Yeah, that's a really fabulous way to engage those families. And I would also assume that during the pandemic, as families were all struggling trying to balance work for those that were still able to do that or not, and work from home or not, as we know, there's a lot of variability sort of in that sort of ecosystem, and so for the parents, and the students and the school to be able to say we're going to have this collaborative time, very dedicated collaborative time, I think that was really a spectacular way to go. I'm super curious, how well prescribed was it? I mean, I'm really curious about, in a traditional sort of expectation, number of families that you would have participate in, say, pre-COVID, versus how many showed up in that virtual environment, was it more? Was it the same? Was it fewer? What did you find?

Rachel Shreve: [00:14:18] It was really dependent a lot on how the schools were able to advertise and let families know. We're limited in our ability to reach directly out to families. We don't have access to email addresses and all of that. And so, we are very tied to how the schools publicize our events. But occasionally, we'd have five or six families, but on average, it was 20, and we've even had upwards of 50 families sign on.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:45] That's really spectacular. Congratulations. Good for you. Because that is true engagement. So, that's amazing.

Rachel Shreve: [00:14:52] And in the past, pre-pandemic, a lot of schools would ask for family nights, and we would drag our feet a little bit, because they are quite a production, trying to find the quantity of food to be able to have even 10 families participate or the space for them to all gather and cook, and we feel safe, so we could actually host more families and impact more families this way, which is why we decided to continue doing family nights this way even after kids return to in-person school.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:25] Yeah. I was going to ask that question and that was going to be my guess, that it was so successful and it gave you that sort of ease opportunity, because you're correct, cooking requires space, especially when you do those sort of family sort of full on at the school or at a community center. So, I could see how this would have great opportunity for you.

Rachel Shreve: [00:15:46] Just the time it takes for everybody to wash their hands before you start, I mean-

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:53] Exactly. So, you could set up some prerequisites, here's all the stuff, here's your list of ingredients, or here's your ingredient kit that you picked up, and this is what we're going to do. I just really, really love that. I think that's fabulous. And it sounds like you made some pretty amazing things with it, too, when I was reading through the materials that your staff sent over. Share with us a little bit about one of the other projects that you're working on that is Cooking With Kids, the BIG little Project. And so, share with us just a little bit about that, because that's, again, sort of another approach that you're taking as it relates to food.

Rachel Shreve: [00:16:28] This is a really fun project. We've been so excited about it. It's taken off in the last year or so. We have a collaboration that we're doing with a local photographer, Gabriella Marx, and a creative director, that they're both volunteering their time, Robert Nachman. And we have an existing Superchef program that actually our current executive director started more than 10 years ago, because Santa Fe has such a rich culinary-

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:57] It's amazing. Anybody has not been there, it's a place to go, right? It's a food extravaganza.

Rachel Shreve: [00:17:02] Yeah, it really is. And to connect those chefs with the schools, and it's been a really wonderful and inspiring program. Chefs volunteer in our classes. They don't lead the classes, they're kind of like superstars when they come in. A lot of times, the first question is, "Are you on TV?" But the other thing that these chefs do for us is they provide some really amazing visibility for us in the community, and they're really ambassadors for cooking, and that they elevate the level of cooking to this amazing culinary level, but also that it's just inspiring that their love of food is contagious.

And kids are really, really jazzed to see them when they come in with their whites. And so, we wanted to translate that excitement that we experience in the classroom into a kind of outreach that could extend beyond and actually encourage—it's kind of like a PSA, cook with your kids, it's worth it. And so, the first installation of this is the Big Chef, Little Chef.

So, we have chefs that either their children, their grandchildren, niece, or nephew, a close someone that they're very close with in the studio, maybe they have a giant whisk and a little whisk, and they dress them similarly. So, the first chef that we had, it was actually his original idea, he's from Italy, his name is Cristian Pontiggia, has tattoos all up his arms, and he has a little boy who I think was four at the time. And they got little tattoo, the little sleeves.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:54] Stickers, uh-huh. Sleeves, uh-huh.

Rachel Shreve: [00:18:55] And they've had pasta dough and they're playing with it. It just really captures this playful element that can happen in the kitchen when kids are invited in, and they only get invited in when grownups do that. And it's really tempting to shoot kids out of the kitchen, and we totally get that. And also, it's not saying cook every day with your kids. There are times when when you just can't, you just need to get dinner on the table. But it really is a valuable thing to invite them and to let them do a little, to let them help, to let them be a little bit more this time, have them help clean up. It's so valuable. It's something that they'll carry with them throughout their life. We need these life skills. This is how we take care of ourselves.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:43] No, absolutely. It's fabulous. And I think it'd be so much fun to be able to see these chefs and these little ones working side by side to do a lesson together. That's really spectacular and a great way to do that, because one of the things that's so key here, in addition to trying to make that shift around understanding, and wanting, and craving healthy food alternatives is also then making sure that these kiddos see the breadth and depth of opportunity from a career standpoint, right? And you can't do that if you can't find somebody that looks or feels like me, right?

We know that from just a basic identity sort of standpoint. So, I love the way you're thinking about, and crafting these experiences, and tapping into a wide array of, quite frankly, the very rich history and cultural diversity that is part of Northern New Mexico. So, I love that aspect of it as well. You mentioned earlier about that middle school food lab that you had to put sort of on hold during the pandemic, which totally makes sense, so I'm curious, though, that, now, that things are shifting back to more of an in-person opportunity, is that a program that you're picking back up? Is it on hold? What's happening with that?

Rachel Shreve: [00:20:54] We actually piloted our first couple of classes in March of 2020. We got a grant through the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation to create and pilot these middle school food lab classes. And we started with, the first one was the science of taste flavor and aroma. So, it was a really interesting—different things that kids get to do. I helped with this one. I mean, I was in the back putting blue food coloring into different types of juices, because like interesting, the discovery for kids of how our different senses inform our tastes and our sense of smell.

So, if all of the juices are blue, how much of your sense of sight is telling you what what kind of juice this is, or like I think we had orange juice, peach, and apple, and it's very challenging. Sometimes, they could make it immediately go, "Oh, I know what this one is", but then they were a little off. So, just kind of what happens when you take away one of your senses and how do the other ones function?

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:00] Perfect STEM activity. Fabulous. Yeah, wonderful.

Rachel Shreve: [00:22:06] So, we were able to actually resume those classes this fall. And we work with several K through eight schools, so because we were already in those schools, that was just a natural partnership to extend into those upper grade levels. And the kids have already had Cooking with Kids, the standard, basic program, and so this incorporates cooking, but also STEM elements.

One of the most recent ones was the states of matter, and they made a fall harvest salad like we've done on our online cooking classes with families, and so they might be familiar with that, but they talked about, what happens when you toast bread? And is that a chemical change? And then, we made hard-boiled eggs. So, like what happens when you hard-boil an egg? And that's a chemical change, versus when you tear up lettuce, and that's a physical change. And then, getting into the making salad dressings, and the difference between oil and vinegar, and how they don't want to bind together, and what's an emulsifier.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:09] I like that, yeah.

Rachel Shreve: [00:23:10] Then, the wonderful nerdy things that we all love about food, those of us that are in the program, and can't always get into that with second graders, and so it's really fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:21] So, it's great, and I love the fact that you've partnered with the Los Alamos National Lab for this. Our listeners come from all over the world, so a bit of context, within the US, we have these whole set of national labs, the number of changes from time to time over the year, I want to say there's 12 of them currently, and don't quote me on that, folks, if I have that wrong. But these national labs are these regional, they're super science think tanks, and they all have a slightly different purpose, and specialty, and all that sort of stuff.

And so, the Los Alamos Lab actually is pretty unique across that particular ecosystem. And so, I'm super curious about that connection. I mean, obviously, funding the work, but I guess my hope would be that they are actually playing some type of role with you in terms of thinking about the science that could be made available through the study of food, and utilizing food with that, and that partnership around sort of STEM and STEM careers. So, is that the case or is it just a funding partner?

Rachel Shreve: [00:24:21] They have actually consulted with us as to developing this curriculum. And we actually have, one of our board members, Alan Jones, has been consulting with us as well, especially on the science of taste, and flavor, and aroma, of how our brains work when we are tasting, and smelling, and all of those things, what happens in our brain when we use our senses. And so, we've had some really spectacular partners to help us develop this curriculum.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:48] Yeah. And that's really, really fabulous. I mean, like I said, just being able to go in and tap into those types of sciences that you might not normally pair back up or folks might not think to pair up in this case with food, but that partnership leads to a whole host of activities, and possibilities, and areas of exploration that are completely meaningful for the middle school age. So, I think that's fabulous.

Rachel Shreve: [00:25:12] One of the exciting things is that in doing these classes, we were actually approached by the math teacher in one of our schools to request it, "Could you do something with math? Could you do some mathematics?" Absolutely. And so, I think those kids, they made breadsticks. So, we talked up, and they did a measuring of like dry measure, and how measuring tools matter, like what you pick, what you use really matters.

And they did some different experiments with the measuring tools, and then made the bread dough and all the fractions that happen with dividing the dose, you can get some exact identical breadsticks. But then, it's fun because they get to eat what they've just done, and also, that experience of they did math, they did science, and then they get to eat and enjoy that. It almost kind of solidifies that learning in some way in their bodies.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:20] Yeah, absolutely. I love that. So, one of the last programs that I want to talk about that you're currently working on is this alignment with social justice standards. And so, sort of share whether that's sort of top of mind and front of mind globally for lots and lots of folks. So, share with us just a little bit about what that means from your perspective and how it ties from a programmatic element, but more importantly, sort of the end result or impact that this type of alignment, this purposeful thinking matters as it relates to kids.

Rachel Shreve: [00:26:57] One of the things that makes cooking with kids a valuable program for schools is that we work hard to be up to date with standards in general. So, we are aligned with English, language arts, literacy, language arts standards, math, next-generation science standards. Actually, that was a recent

addition. And then, most recently was this alignment with the Southern social justice standards through the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In a lot of ways, our programs, actually, the things that we do are naturally aligned with many of these standards. And so, it was just a conscious merging of those, too, a conscious alignment of saying, when kids are learning about food from another place in the world. So, right now, we're making Cuban beans and rice, and very soon, we'll be making a French dish called potatoes persillade. When they're learning about foods, they may be familiar with the food, but they may not be familiar with the way that that's made.

And so, it's helping them make a connection between what they eat, what's familiar to them and something that may not be so familiar. And to be able to approach it in a way that's respectful and curious, and that can translate into approaching new cultures, approaching new people, approaching new ideas with respect and curiosity. And most recently, it's come up in this new unit, we have maps, and different activities, and Russia is on the map. And we've been hearing some in classes, you hear that, kids are trying things on for size, talking about what's going on in the world, because they're hearing their parents and other grown-ups talk about that.

And we may not directly bring it up, but if it comes up in a class, it's a perfect place to talk about that in a safe environment, to talk about, there are people all over the world, and the decisions that get made at the political level, not always the same as how people experience life day in and day out, and we can't make an assumption about a group of people because of a certain something you're hearing in the news. And bringing it back to food brings it back to something we all have to do, and this helps us link ourselves to our own humanity, to others.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:33] Yeah. And that's a powerful lesson for students and I love the fact that you've made it so culturally immersive. So, that's really, really exciting. So, I always like to close the program recognizing that folks are listening to this and the hope is they get super excited about what they've heard in our conversation today. And so, what is the opportunity for access to the programming the ideas, to the curriculum, because we will share resources, obviously, with a program, but as folks are sitting back and they've been listening to you and I have this conversation, thinking, oh, my gosh, I can do some of these things and absolutely can in my own classroom or in my community, if folks are looking for assistance, what would you recommend as somebody who wants to get started with a food program that is super immersive and hands on?

Rachel Shreve: [00:30:22] One of the things we know is that Cooking with Kids is so successful, because we are a local program that started locally from a need that was identified in our community. And so, what we intend to do is share our resources. We have a lot of free resources. So, one of the things we do that's very simple, our tasting lessons, their fruit and vegetable tasting lessons, hands on, taste four different varieties of apples, tastes a variety of citrus fruits, tastes a variety of salad greens.

And that's something that teachers can incorporate in their classroom with relative ease. And we do know that those are accessed quite frequently. We've actually had people from 48 states and around the world download our curriculum. It's very exciting. And we know that there's a demand for that. We also have cooking lessons that, right now, are a small fee, pay for download, and we're looking for a way to create a national curriculum outreach.

We'd love to get a corporate sponsor at some point that would provide so that we could provide all of our resources for free. Right now, it's a lot of time, and effort, and resources to create this curriculum, and we just really can't quite provide it for free as much as we would love to. And the point being that Cooking with Kids, we are committed to serving northern New Mexico, and we would love, at some point, to also be able to

provide training and resources to other communities who want to do this.

And occasionally, someone will call and we'll talk to you if that's the case, but we'd also love to support that more with the funding. We don't have as many resources right now to provide that, and that's one thing we would love to do. So, for the time being, we have those free resources online and there's some really great how-to videos to get kids started in the kitchen, they're in English and Spanish.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:27] Fabulous.

Rachel Shreve: [00:32:28] Slicing and mincing, making a simple salad dressing, just some real simple ways for parents, other family members, teachers, easy ways to get kids involved in making their own food.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:42] That's fabulous. Absolutely. So, Rachel, I want to thank you very much both for the work that you were doing with Cooking with Kids, what a fabulous organization, but also, for making time to talk with us today. We really appreciate it. So, thank you so much.

Rachel Shreve: [00:32:57] Thank you so much for reaching out to us. This is a big deal for us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:01] Good.

Rachel Shreve: [00:33:03] In a lot of ways, we think of ourselves as a pretty small nonprofit, but we have big hopes for the future, and we just feel that kids everywhere need and would benefit from positive experiences with healthy food, and whether that happens in a home kitchen and a cooking classroom, and that communities really need to rally around their kids, that this is a very important piece of kids' education, and for living healthy and thriving.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:35] Absolutely. Well, again, thank you so much for joining us today and good luck with the program.

Rachel Shreve: [00:33:42] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:44] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media at Annalies Corbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.