

7-Working Cooperatively with the Schools

A huge stressor for families these days is distance/ remote learning. Audra Cherbonnier from Midshore Behavioral Health will talk about ways to collaborate with your child's school, support teachers and your children for best practices, and ways to support your friends and neighbors with children if your children have left the nest. This is a model of using your "tribe" or "village" to help pull through these challenging days, accommodations for kids, ways to structure a school space at home, how to manage multiple kids in distance learning

Hi, I am Audra Cherbonnier and I am the child and adolescent coordinator from Mid Shore Behavioral Health. Can we all start by agreeing that the past year is not at all what we signed up for? We have all had to adapt our lifestyles every day to new and different needs. We have had to quarantine, adjust to wearing a mask all the time, our kids have not been to school regularly in over a year, our jobs may have switched to a virtual platform, shut down or gotten even more stressful than ever as essential employees, our day to day routines have changed dramatically, our stress levels and anxiety are at an all-time high, etc. etc. etc. But, I am not here to talk about bad news, actually, I am here to help support you as you work collaboratively to support your family and your children.

The first thing I'd like to talk about in this video entitled working cooperatively within our communities, is your need to take care of yourself. If you, the parent, are not well, your family will not be well. Learning to take time for self-care is one of the greatest gifts you can give your family. Things as simple as relaxing your mind and body through prayer, meditation and deep breathing exercises, limiting your media and screen time, laughing (yes, I said laughing), moving more, hugging those in your home regularly (let's face it, we are all missing hugs) and keeping a gratitude journal are just a few ideas for self-care. Not only will these self-care tips help you, but you are also modeling for your family how to care for themselves and one another. Watch a comedy as a family and laugh! Now that the days are getting longer and the sun is shining a little more, get outside. Kick a ball around, take a nature walk, breathe in the fresh air together. Help your children see that when your tension rises, there are tools and tricks you can use to help lower the stress level. Practice these ideas together daily.

So lets move on to school. I know that probably none of us thought that when we had children we would be educating them at home on a virtual platform with synchronous and asynchronous days, right? But, remember, life is about being flexible and adapting, so that's what we have all done. Can I ask you to please remember that this is not only difficult for your family, but for your child's teacher's family, as well? I doubt that college prepared our teachers for virtual learning like we are currently experiencing. So, we are all learning together, so let's be kind and give grace to all we come into contact with.

Most of us have been in a virtual learning setting for at least 6 months by now. Have you set up a learning area for your child with few distractions and the learning tools they need close at hand? If not, it's never too late. Maybe you don't have space in your home for a dedicated learning area. That's ok. Do you have a kitchen table that you can put a tri-fold display up to section off each child. Let them decorate it and add pockets, calendars or other learning prompts to support their learning. If you do have space, is the chair comfortable or do they need a different style or kind of chair? Is the desk or table at a good height for them to sit comfortably? Or do they need to stand in order to move while engaged in learning. Every learner is not the same and needs options for success. This is a great topic

for conversation with their teacher as well. Maybe you have figured out that your child learns the best when they are wrapped in their blanket and sitting cross-legged on their chair. Explore different options with your child and ask them for feedback. This new learning environment is difficult enough, let's engage in conversation to make it more enjoyable and productive.

Do you have a schedule for your child so that they are awake and ready to learn daily? It's not like we are now rushing them out the door for the bus (some may be by now, but not every day), but we still need to help them be prepared for learning. Do they have a regular bed time and time to get up in the morning? Are they following a routine with breakfast, showering, brushing their teeth and hair? If not, let's work on that this week. Maybe they need a visual schedule to remind them of what they need to do each day. There is another video in this series that addresses visual schedules, be sure to view it for more suggestions.

How are you managing your work and your child's school? Are you partnering with a friend to swap off days that your children learn virtually at each of your homes? Is that something you could do? Would that help your child to feel more connected socially, as well? Could they spend a day or two a week with grandparents or relatives while you go to work or work from home? If so, how can you set them up for success in that setting. Even though we are still socially distancing, there are creative ways to engage socially with our village. Who is in your village? Maybe it's another family who shares similar practices and beliefs about social distancing that you can partner with. Maybe it's a teen neighbor who is bored due to lack of social interacting who would love to come and tutor your children or plan an activity with them. You may even have a neighbor who has an empty nest who would be willing to mentor your child through this time. Why not reach out today to someone and add another support person to your village?

How is your child doing academically? Are they logging on daily to complete assignments? Could you offer incentives for these if needed? Maybe an incentive could be as simple as some free time to watch their favorite show on tv, points towards a bigger incentive like a shopping trip, their favorite snack or a trip to the park. Could you make learning more engaging and fun for your child? Maybe study something of interest to them, such as the Mars Rover, ocean life, let them plan out your next vacation, etc.

Have you reached out to your child's teacher to ask them how they are doing and how you can support them at this time? Now more than ever, teachers need parents to partner with them for students academic success. You as the parent are the most important piece of their success. Your children seeing you collaborate and work collectively with their teachers, models for them how to collaborate with others. Teachers need you to communicate with them and give feedback, positive and when needed constructive.

Let's talk about when your child returns to school. Are they anxious about it or pretty depressed because they've been away from their friends for so long? Have you talked to anyone at the school about this? This would be a great time to reach out to the school social worker or guidance counselor. Your child might need some extra support to return to school. Maybe joining a lunch bunch to discuss their feelings or being referred to school based mental health services. Our school mental health coordinator and the school social workers have been working really hard to put supports and additional services in place as plans for students to return to the buildings are worked out. If your child has

experienced a trauma over this time at home, please let the school know so that they can help support them in their healing journey.

We've covered a lot in this video clip and I want to wrap it up with some good news. So what's the good news you ask? The good news is that overall children are resilient. Resilience is the ability to achieve positive outcomes – mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually – despite adversity. We may not be able to take away the experiences that our children have had in the past year, but we can create new experiences of resilience for them. It's really not what happens during a crisis, but after the crisis. Such as having a supportive family and school staff who ask the children how they are doing and listen to their responses, helping children learn the words to describe their feelings, regaining some control over their day to day life for the children, bringing attention to the ways that they adapted and were successful, and sources of faith, hope and cultural traditions that provide meaning and a sense of value in life. Take the time to have fun with your children and to express emotions and feelings in the midst of play. Normalize the stressors of life, as we all know there will always be stress and having the tools to effectively deal with it help us to bounce back.

To wrap up, remember there are plenty of people in your village who are willing to help you and your children. Don't hesitate to reach out to them. We are a resilient community and we have hope for a bright future for each of you and your families.