Creating a positive home environment, and other tips for uncertain times

October 27 2020

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The uncertainties surrounding parents right now can feel unmooring. Questions arise, like "Will my child be able to return to school? Are they becoming socially isolated? How will this impact their future?"

Michael Nakkula, chair of the Human Development and Quantitative Methods Division and co-founder of the Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development (PMHOD) at Penn GSE, and Andy Danilchick, co-founder and director of PMHOD, are helping teachers care for their students and their own mental wellness during this COVID-19 era.

Parents would also benefit from cultivating what they call an "uncertainty mindset," a disposition that encourages embracing the unknown to remain responsive to needs and opportunities as they emerge.

Here are three ways their team suggests you can plan for the uncertainties of the moment:

Create a Positive Climate at Home

Parents can begin by asking themselves, How can I make my home a safe and supportive space for learning?

"Many parents now find themselves navigating the boundary between being supportive of their [child's learning](link) and being invasive," explains Nakkula. Physical classroom spaces so often serve as places of identity exploration and cognitive risk taking. As students are exposed to [new ideas](link), the freedom to question that a classroom usually provides is a driver of their learning. "As parents, we need to think about what privacy our kids deserve while engaging in this learning at home," adds Nakkula.

Communicate with Children, Their Teachers, and Other Parents

"It can be easy, at this moment, to retreat into our own personal bubbles," says Danilchick. "But communication and collaboration are

absolutely essential." For parents, though, this means first and foremost listening. "When parents take the position of listener, rather than fixer, it makes children more active agents in communicating their needs," Danilchick explains. "Adults and children both enacting agency can be an especially protective factor for our mental wellness in these times.

This also means supporting students in sharing their wants and needs with their teachers. As teachers adapt to the new demands of the COVID-19 era, they need to hear from students and families what is and isn't working.

If the child is in the early grades, helping them practice how to ask their teacher for specific help is a great foundational skill. For older children, start with their ideas, asking: How do you want to handle it? If they ask you to intervene on their behalf, think about whether they can, but just don't want to, or if your assistance is truly warranted. If a problem reaches such a magnitude that you feel you must intervene, reach out to the teacher or other person directly involved before escalating the issue to the administration.

Lastly, there is always power in numbers, and in acts of collaboration—find other parents to bounce ideas and questions off of: Are they having the same issue? What is working for their child? Doing so can help reveal larger-scale issues—and help parents from becoming too isolated themselves.

Be an Advocate for Equity

At a time when students and families face vastly divergent challenges in adjusting to COVID-19-era learning environments, schools sit at the nexus of national equity concerns. Often, parents may recognize issues before teachers do. They know which students are spending more time alone because their parents are essential workers, or who has

responsibilities to care for siblings.

"We know one of the most stratifying issues at the moment is lack of internet and device access," shares Danilchick. "If that is a problem in your family—or, if it isn't, but you are aware of policies penalizing kids for this inequity—reach out to the school and push for change."

Nakkula and Danilchick's work is focused on how to deepen relationships between students, educators, and their families, so as to make better decisions about students' needs and wellness. They also recognize that the wellness of the parents and teachers in students' lives directly impacts how supported students are. Danilchick emphasizes, though, that we should look beyond mere maintenance of mental health; it is also crucial to think about optimal development—the unique pathways to mental wellness and fulfillment that individuals envision for themselves—despite the sub-optimal conditions of the COVID-19 era.

"Kids want to engage in the world. To do so, they need to feel challenged and inspired," he says. "Amid this crisis, we can't forget to find ways, however simple, to create joy and excitement," adds Nakkula. "For parents and families, this is the way we'll make it through this moment."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Creating a positive home environment, and other tips for uncertain times (2020, October 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-positive-home-environment-uncertain.html