



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

Back to School: A Focus on Mental Health

Jeanne Blake: What message do you have for parents and other adults in kids' lives about the lingering effects that you're seeing?

Ben Handrich: Counselors are supposed to have kind of three domains that they cover. We do academic work with kids helping them plan their four years while they're in high school. We help them with college and career readiness and getting them ready for life after high school. And then social and emotional supports is the third area. So, in a perfect world, you're balanced between those three different domains. And we are overrun with social and emotional supports right now. We've got a constantly revolving door of students that just need emotional support, or need mental health support, and we can't keep up with that. So, my big concern is making sure that we're giving kids the supports they need, if they're dealing with a mental health crisis, or even suicide ideation. Because the big thing for us is communication. Talk to us about it, let's get you supports. I think it's a scary topic and the just the word suicide is so triggering. We need to talk openly about it, because so many kids are thinking about suicide, and need supports that we can offer them within the school and outside of the school as well.

Jeanne: Ben, I think it's really important that parents understand that. That will be surprising to some parents, do you agree?

Ben: Absolutely. Our district, our school has been gathering our own data around suicide ideation. We do what used to be called a suicide risk assessment. But the current research around suicide ideation is that you can't assess risk among suicidal people. And, so, we changed that to just a suicide prevention protocol, or gathering information for a student to help support them. Pre-pandemic there was a steady rise in the suicide prevention protocols we were doing as school counselors. And that number continues to increase. It stopped for a moment and kind of went baseline during the pandemic, but it's because we were not exposed to the kids in the way we are again.

Jeanne: Right.

Ben: This is really our first year back where school is back in traditional session and that's a big concern to me. Being back in the traditional sense is not the concern. I'm so excited about that. The concern is, what kinds of mental health crises are we going to see with students back full time?

Jeanne: The experts we work with in our program have said repeatedly we can't identify those young people who might be most affected by the pandemic, and so we really have to give all kids the opportunity to talk openly.

Ben: Yeah, absolutely. In our school, we've created a lot of redundancies within our mental health programs. Some of them reach out to classrooms. Some are through small group work that our school counseling team is doing. While the titles of those programs might be a little different, they all have the same general trajectory, which is to help build self-regulatory skills for kids, and to help build self-awareness so kids know when they need to advocate for themselves.

Jeanne: I like the theme I'm hearing from you – it all sounds like it's stigma reducing. That it's a sign of strength to speak up and ask for help and acknowledge what you're feeling.

Ben: Yeah, I love that, because there is stigma around mental health and just the term itself. Even though the end goal is that we treat mental health like we treat exercise and nutrition. It's just one of the many ways that we take care of the whole self and kids are more open to talking about it. And we see the fruit of that labor through how popular these different mental health groups are that we've created over time.

Jeanne: Oh, I'm glad to hear that. That's actually very encouraging. So maybe the pandemic has given us an opportunity to highlight the importance of supporting one's own mental health and that of other people.

Ben: Absolutely.

Jeanne: Well, thank you for all the good work you're doing.

Ben: Yeah, right back atcha Jeanne.

Chris Moore, School Psychologist and K-12 Social-Emotional Health Coordinator Salem-Keizer Public Schools, Salem OR

Jeanne Blake: How do you describe the impact of the pandemic on kids' mental health?

Chris Moore: At the beginning of the pandemic, we saw that initial surge of connectivity in our community, of trying to make sense of what was happening, of being flexible and trying to take care of each other. But once that initial adrenaline of the crisis kicked in, and the realization we were going to be doing this for a while, we started to see folks retreat into the background. We lost track of many students, no matter how many times staff reached out and got into the community and knocked on doors. Students who had already been around the margins in our community, were further marginalized.

Jeanne: That lack of connection and being marginalized – how are you seeing that manifest in individual students?

Chris: What it looks like, broadly, is being about two years behind in terms of emotional maturity. You see students come in as sixth graders, but they have the developmental level of fourth graders when engaging in conflict and trying to connect. They've come to expect having their needs met immediately. Or being able to do what they want to do when they want to do it. And when you step back into a school space that has some expectations around structure, consistency, schedule, and self-management, it's a heavy lift for a lot of students. And while we've seen many students bounce back, we've also seen many struggle.

Jeanne: Part of my concern is that children who are behind know it. And it creates anxiety, and worse.

Chris: One of our strategies for trying to mitigate that is leaning into a culture of inclusion. We aren't just getting right into the work of academic achievement and focusing on skill building. We're taking time to connect, to see kids as kids, to show ourselves as adults, as humans also struggling and modeling how to successfully manage stress. Or even to be honest and say, "I'm having a hard day today and that's okay." While that may feel vulnerable, and like an adult shouldn't share that, it's an opportunity to teach students it's okay to be in that space, and you can recover from it.

Jeanne: What do you think might surprise parents, and others, about the mental health of children you're seeing now?

Chris: One is that many of our students are much more resilient than we ever gave them credit for. It's our job as caregivers to look out for the dangers in the world for our kids and protect them as much as possible. But there comes a time where protecting them from the things that help them grow and help them become more resilient and more engaged in the world can do harm. So, what we've seen is a lot of kids have bounced back in meaningful ways. Some kids have developed new skills. It's important for parents to hear that. They can take a few deep breaths and take it easy on themselves and recognize that the basics of showing up for your kid, connecting with your kid, and listening to your kid, all those things – rinse and repeat – they matter over time and create the conditions for kids to really thrive and learn from this time.

Jeanne: The goal of our program is to give parents skills and tools they need to create opportunities for ongoing conversations with kids. And, as you said, when someone is struggling, it can be hard for some to set that aside and be present.

Chris: Yeah, I talk with a lot of parents from diverse backgrounds at various points in their own day to day struggle of what it means to be a parent in 2022. I've noticed in those conversations is that by and large, parents are doing the absolute best they can with the tools they have to provide the love, care, and support their kids need. And many of them are afraid they're not doing enough, or not doing it right. And when you start with negative self-talk, kids feel it. And they don't know what to do, how to make sense of that. Our job is to manage ourselves first, give ourselves grace and space to breathe and reflect, and then engage. I'll ask parents, to write down everything on their To Do list. I ask them to limit it to five minutes. Then I ask them to describe those things to me, and I summarize and reflect back. Then I ask them to write a To Be list. Who do they want to be as a parent, as a partner, as a community member – and make sure those anchor our day-to-day activities, and not get distracted by the To Do's that pile up over time and disconnect us from ourselves and oftentimes from our kids

Jeanne: You're really talking about a mindfulness approach.

Chris: Yes, absolutely. You got it.

Jeanne: There will be lingering effects from the pandemic. We don't know which kids will experience these lingering effects, so we can't assume everybody's okay. And that's why these conversations we're encouraging parents to have are so important.

Chris: We were struggling with a lot of these issues prior to the pandemic. We'd seen a decade-long trend of increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Those were real. The pandemic shined a spotlight on the fractures in our community, gaps in mental health care, the level of need. And that's increased a sense of urgency around doing that work and paying close attention to it.

We have to be mindful of what tends to happen to humans when natural disasters strike. There is a period of time where there is intense energy and heroic efforts that tend to yield to lows and disconnection. And we've been up and down a lot in the last couple of years. Research shows that after acute trauma, or the acute crisis passes, there's an extended period where we still don't have a sense of the impact on individuals, communities, and our infrastructure. So, while we're moving forward, we have to be mindful that some of the things we are seeing now are likely to amplify in the months ahead. But we also know better at this point, and we can leverage many of the lessons we've learned over the last couple of years to care for each other in more intentional ways.

These interviews were edited for brevity

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