

A Health Educator's Perspective on Parental Depression and Schools

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SUE MCKENZIE: Well, if we want to bridge the gap between the program and the school, first we want to look from the school's perspective. Schools opening their doors, being host to these kinds of programs not only allows the program to have a place to function, but it allows the parents a positive experience in the school environment. And we know that a lot of families, especially families that come into our country under various situations, don't feel safe in schools. And so if schools can open their doors to community programs and begin to build trust with families that way, would be really critical. Wouldn't it be great if schools put some money in budgets for some of those that believed in it enough for that to happen?

But then I also think from program people, we need to have our eyes open to how do we integrate school people into the program delivery, so that it's not just talking about the classroom teacher, but maybe there's an aspect of the program where the classroom teacher is actually invited in to do some practice and learn with the parents in support of the child.

When I think about parental depression, first of all, being a parent and being depressed is really not very different than anyone else being depressed, right? They're going to have the same symptoms. They may be shutting down. They may be getting more angry. They may be sleeping too much, not enough; all those basic symptoms we think about. But with the parental role, it's a 24/7 role. And so you don't step aside from being a mom. You might be able to step aside from work, or you might be able to fake it for the hours at work. You just don't do that in the context of family.

And so when we think about parental depression in the family, we think about the key role of parental communication. And we know that when people are depressed, they may not want to communicate very much with the world, or they may not be able to because of brain functioning at that time at the same level they communicated before. And yet often parents are what makes the system work.

What this might look like in the classroom is a student who's staring out the window instead of doing the math problem. What it might look like is a student who's poking the kids next to them, and you think that they're trying to cause problems, and actually you may discover that they're trying to connect, but have maybe lost some of those connecting skills, depending on the age of the child. It may look like anger. It may be the only safe place for them to demonstrate some of their frustration with their life. And it may come out as anger towards you or other students, frustration. So lots of behaviors that we experience as challenging as teachers can actually be signs that there's turmoil at home.

I think the first challenge is they may have no clue. So they may see these behaviors in the classroom. And I think all of us as human beings want to know the why behind behavior. My suggestion is that we do what we know is helpful in most behavioral challenged kids, without

needing to know the why. Because if we're doing those activities of creating a safe place, of being able to have conversations of helping them to see themselves as competent, those kinds of things that we do with people; we're much more likely to have a trusting environment, where they will disclose some of what's going on.

So stigma is probably the key thing that is going to be the challenge. A parent may not tell us. A child may not tell us, and we may never know. And how do we act blind? I think it's to assume that behind every challenging behavior is some level of pain, of confusion. Something's going on. People don't just choose to bring their stuff out into the world. Yeah.

And then isolation, so I might learn as a teacher that a parent is facing depression, or that a child may reveal to me that. And then they may close right back up, and isolate, and in essence may push me away, not sure that they should have revealed what it is they revealed; and so to be prepared for that isolation and to remain constant with our rapport building that we try to do as educators.

So what can the schools do to support students? I actually think this is a fairly complex dilemma that schools are in. The easy answer is provide a safe environment for kids to be able to function in their day, a safe place to be able to talk about some of the challenges that they're facing, a place where they can experience success and feel competent, where they may not at home have that sense of competency in dealing with the situation at home. And schools are good at those kinds of things typically.

When you add the layer of the family context, all of that really needs to happen in that context of family. It's not just about how do I help this child, because as we're building trust with a child, we have to be building trust with the parent at the same time. And most educators will tell you that building strong relationships with parents can be one of the toughest things that they try to do. And so what it can look like is I'm creating a safe place in my classroom for this child to learn and feel good about themselves, and yet some of the very positive things I do may be opposed to the experience that I have at home. And then the child is in this internal dilemma of wait a minute, should I be having more fun at school? Should I be relating more to the teacher than I am to my mom? And so it's that fine balance of doing all the things that we know to do as educators to engage students to help them to feel safe and connected, and doing our best to have the family come along with that.

For schools to be able to address these challenges, first and foremost is to address their own stigma. And just not in a shame and blame way, but just to recognize that sometimes when I don't understand what's going on, I back off. And so to really get clear about maybe I've never experienced this before with somebody. And yet I'm being asked to move towards them, instead of away from them. To have some training, and support, and a safe place to talk about their own fears, which is really what stigma is. Right? Fear is based on inaccurate information. So address that.

And then to take a resilience approach with families, the tendency may be to say, oh mom's depressed. We don't want to ask anything of mom. Almost go into that pity mode versus, wait a minute. Mom has some strengths here, and just like the child has strengths here. And how do I

identify those strengths, and build off of those? What are some skills that we might talk together about, but skills that are based on mom or dad strengths versus lowering our expectations to the point of we're actually setting the parents aside, when the parent needs to be involved as much as the parent can be involved?