

Where You Are

S4 Episode 2 —School Anxiety: Getting Your Child Back to Their School Routine

Link: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast/S4E2>

TRANSCRIPT:

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Dr. DiGiacomo: When we think about these anxiety based school attendance challenges, what we know, the key thing to keep in mind is that anxiety is really uncomfortable, but it's not harmful. Most challenges with school attendance are completely solvable. So it is a very distressing thing to experience as a parent, but in the vast majority of cases, it is solvable and it is a very good reason to be hopeful.

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Michelle Horn: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Michelle Horn.

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith. School is a big part of kids' lives and for children with anxiety, getting to school or managing a whole day at school can be really hard. In our episode today, we're talking about strategies parents can use when anxiety gets in the way and makes it difficult to get your child to or to stay at school.

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Michelle Horn: As a parent myself, I've experienced firsthand some challenges with school anxiety, and I know that this impacts a lot of families. So today we're going to be diving into what's behind the school anxiety that makes it so difficult for some kids to get to or stay at school, when parents should reach out for help and who to go to, and some practical strategies for parents and how they can support their child, promote their own coping when things get tough and get their child back in their regular school routine. So whether your child is getting to school most days but really struggling or your child hasn't gone to school in months, this is an episode that will be of interest to you. First up, we'll hear from our parent guest and later on we'll talk to an expert about strategies to work on this tough issue. Let's get into that conversation.

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Bryn Askwith: Our first guest today is Brooke, a public education advocate, a victim support worker, and a mom of three. Brooke is no stranger to dealing with school anxiety and challenges having her child attend school as this is something she

supported her youngest child through during the last few years. Wonderful to have you on the show, Brooke. Welcome.

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Brooke: Thanks, Bryn. Thanks, Michelle.

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Bryn Askwith: Can you start off the conversation by telling us briefly about your child's challenges with anxiety in attending school?

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Brooke: He didn't want to participate in anything that he enjoyed. He was a child that had struggled from kindergarten on. This started to happen when he was in grade one. He wasn't reading, he wasn't writing. He definitely was not where his cohort group was, and I think he was really just struggling with that. He didn't want to participate, he didn't want to go to school, he wasn't enjoying any activities at school. He didn't want to play with his friends. He basically did not want to leave the house, and he did not want to leave me.

No amount of trying to convince him that school was a great place or a safe place or that he was loved there, could get him out the door. He just absolutely refused. He would lay on the floor crying, just completely hysterical. I have two older kids. My partner works away. So it was me and these two older kids trying to encourage him to go, and some days I would make him go. I didn't know what else to do. It was so disruptive for the students in his class because his teacher described it as turtling. He'd pull his hood up over his head, put his head down on the desk and just refused to participate. Or he would hide under the desk or he would just leave the classroom all together.

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Bryn Askwith: Oh wow. That must have been really hard for you and for your son. So we know that when a child in a house is struggling to get to school, these moments can affect the whole family. Brooke, I heard you say that you have two other kids that you were trying to get out the door while these big feelings and emotions of not wanting to go to school were going on for your youngest. So what did you do in those moments when the meltdowns were going on that was helpful for you as a parent to cope? And did you notice if that had any effect on your son?

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Brooke: To be honest, it took me probably the better part of a year and a half to learn how to do that. In the moment, everything was so frantic and emotions were heightened and often in the very beginning, I will admit, I did not deal with it properly. I just was stressed out. I didn't understand what was happening. Physically he was a happy, healthy kid and I couldn't figure it out. What happened was I just needed to do more research. I needed to reach out to professionals and then the place that I got to was trying to be as calm as I could and trying to encourage the other kids to be as calm as they could and to just rally around him and tell him that he was safe, that he was cared for, that he was loved, and that it was going to be okay. And I just learned that being there with him in my calmest version of myself, that helped me just take a big breath. And that's what calmed me down, was knowing that he was okay, that he was safe.

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Bryn Askwith: Your experience also reminds me that kids can really pick up on our emotions. So if we are stressed in these moments, that might fuel our kids' stress, but if we can find ways to be calm, for example, like breathing through those frantic moments like you've shared, Brooke, that actually might bring on some calmness for our kiddos too. And that's a really helpful tip to remember.

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Brooke: Yeah, and by that point, he was seeing a therapist regularly. We were seeing the child psychologist quite often. It was by Zoom because this happened during COVID and then post-COVID. So that was a bit tricky. We were taught different techniques about breathing and just different techniques of just being in the moment and just being with, being there. And that seemed to slow everything down, which I think is what we needed just to catch our breath. And then just to say and to acknowledge, "This is really hard right now and I don't imagine that you're enjoying this either. This is hard for you, this is hard for mama, it's going to be better. And we're going to weather this storm together and I promise you that we're not going to let go. We're not giving up. This will get better."

He was just six when this started. He's now nine and a half. I'm not going to say he didn't understand that, but he understood that he could rely on his dad and I, that he could rely on his grandparents, his brother and sisters, his teachers at school, the counselor, the principal. They were absolutely fabulous and wonderful. We couldn't have had a better support team. And so him knowing that all of those people were there for him, made him feel better. But at the same time, he was also having this internal struggle that he's a very articulate kid. So he would tell us exactly how he felt, but he just didn't understand why. But it's gotten better. We're in a much different place now

than we were three years ago. I think that last three years just feels like a bit of a blur and COVID feels like a bit of a blur too.

But now he's happily going to school. And I think that if we can shed some light on parenting is hard enough when we add in these tricky situations. Of course, everyone is coming ill- equipped to these situations because if you've never had it before, you truly do not understand what is going on. I just remember the first time that one of the doctors gave this diagnosis of anxiety, I just almost couldn't even believe it. And it just was so shocking. I don't think I ever made any space in my brain to accommodate that this really was happening and that we had to get behind it and figure out how to deal with it and get some good resources in place.

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Michelle Horn: Brooke, you mentioned that you were working with a lot of different professionals to help get your son back to school. Can you tell us a bit about that?

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Brooke: I basically went straight to the principal and she immediately gave us an IEP, which triggered some extra support for our little guy. And then they had a school based team, which was the principal, the school counselor, the LST, his current teacher, and then my husband and myself. But basically the plan to get him back to school was that they just gave him so much space. They were really lovely. I know that their first technique was to try and distract him. So he was allowed to go back to his kindergarten room with his kindergarten teacher who, she's retired now, but just a wonderful, wonderful educator. And she put him in a position where he was a helper helping these younger kids. And so it gave him a job to do and a distraction. And they also would let him leave the room to go on body breaks.

They would let him go and see his older sister or his older brother in their class. It really was almost like it was all of the staff made space for this kid to be struggling in school. And if absolutely none of those strategies worked, then he was allowed to phone home. So the good thing about our little guy is he's very expressive and he has quite an emotional bandwidth. So he will tell you exactly how he feels. He's not a secret keeper, that's for sure. And so that made it easy. But sometimes he didn't know how he was feeling or thinking, and those were the moments where we just had to keep our hands on the circle and not let go of him and just be there with him.

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Bryn Askwith: You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. Looking to learn more about specific strategies for kids of all ages with school anxiety and challenges

attending school? Listen to our webinar series on this very topic at keltymentalhealth.ca/school-attendance-webinars.

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Michelle Horn: Thanks again to Brooke for joining us today on the podcast to pick up on some key points discussed by Brooke, Bryn and I are joined by Dr. Alex DiGiacomo. Dr. DiGiacomo is a registered psychologist, a post- doctoral fellow in the Mood and Anxiety Disorders Clinic at BC Children's Hospital and associate at Cornerstone Child and Family Psychology Clinic. Thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast, Dr. DiGiacomo.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Thanks so much for having me.

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Michelle Horn: So to get things started, can you tell us a bit about what's often behind the struggle of kids getting to school or staying at school and how this can show up for kids?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Yeah, absolutely. So when we think about school attendance challenges, we think about them as often being anxiety based. So that's not the same as skipping school or acting out. And when I say anxiety, what I really mean is this phenomenon that has these four parts to it. So the first one is worries. So you might notice kids being worried about academics or friendships or separating from parents or fitting in. The second part is emotions, so feeling really panicky or what's less often thought of is feeling really irritable or angry or having these changes in mood. Third part is you'll see behavior. So attempts to avoid things that are hard or frequent calls home to parents, lots of texting, attempts to avoid. And then often, especially younger kids will complain about physical symptoms like stomach aches or headaches or you'll notice changes in appetite, things like that.

When we think about these anxiety based school attendance challenges, what we know, the key thing to keep in mind is that anxiety is really uncomfortable but it's not harmful. And the other thing that we know for absolutely sure is that anxiety improves when we face hard things. And that's true for all kinds. Whether it's a dog phobia or difficulty getting to school, we know that it improves when we face it. So usually parents of kids who are struggling to attend school are really distressed and anxious themselves. And so in the midst of all of that chaos, it's important to hang onto this one truth that the goal is to help kids to face this fear. That's the way out of the mess that

feels very overwhelming. So anxiety is an alarm system. Sometimes it's very helpful that it's there.

If we're about to get hit by a car or we're going into a dangerous situation, we really want that anxiety alarm response. The problem is sometimes it gets triggered too easily. So we're getting this huge anxiety response in a situation that doesn't fully warrant it and the feelings are very, very real. But what they do is they cause us to want to avoid the thing. And what we know is that when we avoid things, it feels like the right thing to do, but what it actually does is it makes the anxiety worse.

So we'll get into a situation, we'll escape it, and our brains are like, "Okay, you feel better now because you're out of that situation." And so then the next time you encounter the situation, your brain says, "Okay, avoid, escape again." And the desire to avoid is even higher because it worked the time before. And also when you avoid stuff, you don't get the opportunity to see how it turns out. In this case, kids who are avoiding school don't get the opportunity to see, "Oh, maybe actually there are some really good parts of school and maybe there are some parts of school that make me feel good and successful and liked." So that's why avoidance does not help.

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Michelle Horn: I think that's so helpful for parents who are in this situation to remember because it also goes against your parenting instinct, right?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Yes.

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Michelle Horn: You don't want your child to be uncomfortable, you don't want to put them in those situations, but you need to keep that in your mind and know that it's going to benefit them long term.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: That is such a key point, not just for parents but also for educators who find themselves connected to a kid who's really distressed because nobody wants to see a kid distressed. And the natural response a lot of the time is to rescue them and save them. And that's a very understandable and well intentioned position. It's sort of paradoxical, but it ends up being unhelpful because what we really should be doing is supporting a kid to face their fears as opposed to shielding them, even though sometimes it helps us feel better if we shield them.

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Michelle Horn: Thanks so much. And I think we're going to start to get into that now about how we can support them and not shield them and help them face their fears.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. DiGiacomo, Brooke spoke to some of the realities of what her struggle looked like initially for her son about getting him to school. So there were meltdowns on the way out the door as she was trying to get her two other kids to school. There were really big feelings. In these stressful moments, parents are often at a loss as to what to say to their kids and how to help them get through those anxious moments. And really as parents sometimes, like you say, with the best of intentions and wanting to protect them, we can say or do something that can make it worse. So knowing that you've worked with lots of families around this, what would you suggest that parents can say or do in these moments to help their child?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: The first thing to do is zoom out. So preferably not in the moment when your child is having a tantrum, but at another time zoom out and take a step back and remember that most challenges with school attendance are completely solvable. So it is a very distressing thing to experience as a parent, but in the vast majority of cases it is solvable and there is very good reason to be hopeful. And then to reflect on what goes through your mind in those moments where your child is having a lot of trouble getting to school. So a lot of the parents I work with say they're thinking, "I can't handle much more of this. What on earth is wrong with him? What is going on?" It's helpful to remember this idea that whenever our kids are feeling lots of anxiety because we are wired to be super vigilant to their distress, we are also going to be feeling very anxious.

So they're experiencing an anxiety false alarm that's fueling our anxiety false alarm. If you can really internalize that, then the strategies we talk about next will work a lot better. So it's this idea that overall we want to be communicating this posture of confidence and calm to our kids. So on the one hand we want to be very kind and empathetic and on the other hand we want to be very firm, so we want to be communicating confidence to them. And the reason that that's so important is because like I said, emotions are shared, not just anxiety emotions are shared, but feelings of bravery and confidence are also shared. So if we can send that out to our kids, it is also contagious. It is absolutely also contagious. So the kind of posture we want to be in is we want them to be absorbing our calm confidence. We don't want to be absorbing their chaos. So we want it to be going from parent to kid, not from kid to parent.

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Michelle Horn: That 100% makes sense and it makes me think back to Brooke's story, when we asked her about her strategies and what helped for her family, that was the thing that she said really helped them turn the corner, was learning how to be calm in those moments and being confident and just practicing that deep breathing. I'm wondering if there's any specific tips you have for parents for staying calm in the moment, whether it be breathing or things they can tell themselves. What can parents actually do to calm themselves in those moments?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: So usually moments of distress, depending on our own personality, our own upbringing, we can either tend towards being a little bit too tough with our kids or giving in too much. So for example, in the context of school attendance challenges, if you lean a bit towards being too tough, you might be thinking things like, "This is not a big deal, let's go. I thought you were said you were excited. Come on, we're going to do this. This behavior's not acceptable." You can be thinking that. Or if you're on the end where you give in a bit too much, you might be saying things like, "Oh you poor kid, I'm so sorry. This is too hard." So knowing which way you lean I think is helpful because then you can develop some mantras for yourself that correct that.

Deep breathing is excellent. It often sounds really simplistic, but it actually really does work to get your brain to send calming signals to the rest of your body. And also mantras that are specific to you, coping statements that are specific to you. So if you're on the tough side, you can remember, "You know what, it's okay. I'm going to work on being a little bit more kind and a little bit more balanced." If you're on the kind side, you can remind yourself, " You know what, this is uncomfortable for my daughter, but it is not harmful." So I would say those are probably the two keys to staying calm in the moment.

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Michelle Horn: And I guess just thinking about once parents have taken that to heart and started to apply that to situations, are there any other specific strategies that you would suggest parents can start trying in those moments?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: These things are individual, so parents know their kids best. The name of the game generally is you just want to get them out the door. So typically the things that help with that are humor, distraction, being really lighthearted. And this is easier said than done, especially if you've got other kids to get out the door and a job and life is hard. So this is all easier said than done. And there's a lot of room to make mistakes so you do not have to do this perfectly. But planning the night before what they're going to

wear, getting the things out of the way that you know you're going to need to deal with so that you can have a little bit more room to be playful and to give them some attention. For some kids talking a lot helps, for other kids, it really, really doesn't.

We talk about being a detective, so knowing your kid. What do they like? What makes them feel better? Is it music? Is it lots of humor? Is it a little memento that they could put in their pocket like a brave stone or something? So this is the area where you can be creative. And so in those moments you can draw on those things to get them there. But the name of the game really is you're just trying to get them out the door and you should expect anxiety. So they are not going to wake up perfectly calm and it's just not going to be calm. And so it's going to be rough and that's okay. That doesn't mean that you're hurting them or anything, it just means it's part of the process.

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Michelle Horn: Totally. I can totally relate to that as well too. And it definitely for my family was a lot of that trial and error, finding out what worked for my kid and what didn't. Because when this first starts happening, you're thrown totally off guard and you don't know what's going to work or resonate with your kid or not. And what you had said around distraction was something that really worked for my family. A term that we had learned that really seemed to resonate with my son was changing the channel, changing the channel in his brain. So okay, let's change the channel right now. When he started to talk about his anxious thoughts and so we just changed the channel and put on some music and a song that he liked and dance around and totally that piece around the levity and the humor. But there was some things that we tried that didn't work and so it was just that trial and error and knowing that eventually you will find something that does work.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Michelle, I'm so glad you said that because it sounds like you just created a very humorous, lighthearted space and it distracted him. And often parents will say like, "Oh, but if they bring up worries, shouldn't we talk about them? Shouldn't we really give them a lot of space?" There are times to have emotional conversations, but probably not on the way to school, probably not when you're trying to do something really, really hard so that the name of the game in these situations is, okay, let's distract, let's just get them there.

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Michelle Horn: 100% and that was an error that we made at the beginning was being like, but why? But because once he got to school he'd be fine. It was just getting him to school. So we'd be like, "But why? You really like school and you like this and this, so

why are you feeling anxious about going? What are you worried about?" And it would just get him in that mindset thinking about it, right?

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Bryn Askwith: And I can imagine for many parents listening, I think the other thing that you mentioned, Dr. DiGiacomo, was the goal is just getting out the door. That there's steps involved in this and I think that's a big piece for parents who might be listening as well.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Absolutely. Absolutely.

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Michelle Horn: So thanks Dr. DiGiacomo for going through this bigger picture posturing as well as these specific strategies families can try in the moment. I think we're going to switch gears a little bit and think a bit broader than just in the moment. So for those families who have children who aren't going to school regularly or aren't able to handle a whole day at school, can you talk about how parents can start building a plan to get their child back to school?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: So the two things that are super important to keep in mind at home is firstly, if a child is staying home during the school day, the home environment should be really boring. It should not be fun at all. There are lots of things that kids do at home that are obviously going to be more enjoyable than being at school. So having extra time with mom and dad, having a hot lunch with them, watching TV, being on wifi. So if kids are home, the wifi should be turned off, there should not be TV. It should be a really kind of boring environment and that is actually important.

The second thing is making sure the basics are in check. So these are things like sleep, screens, physical activity, and for some families those are already going well and there's not much that you need to tweak. But in other cases, one of those things is actually the thing behind the struggle to getting back to school. So for example, kids that stay up really late on screens have a hard time waking up and it's that battle in the morning that makes it hard to get to school. So depending on the individual situation, that can either be a big part of the solution or a small part of the solution, but it's nevertheless important to keep in mind.

Then if we switch to school, we're wanting to coordinate with the school to come up with a good plan to slowly increase your child's time at school. So firstly, in order to figure

that out, we need to know what this kid's strengths are, what they're motivated to do. So we need to do a really good assessment in collaboration with the school about what's going well, what are their strengths, what do they actually like? So some examples from kids that I've worked with, sometimes kids love the social aspect of school, so maybe they have this one friend that they just really love. So they're starting off with 15 minutes of recess, they're going to go for 15 minutes a day just at recess. That's going to be their first step.

We often talk about bravery ladders where we're basically starting out small with things that seem achievable. Everyone agrees, okay, this child is capable of doing this little thing. We try it out for a few days, we celebrate the success and then we move onto something slightly harder. The challenge with school attendance is these steps are not going to look the same for every kid. For some kids the struggle at school is social, so it's actually going to be easier to start with academic things and equally identifying where are the struggles because you definitely don't want to have initial steps of a going back to school plan involve any of those tough areas.

So for example, kids with social anxiety, you would want to make sure that their fears about returning are managed in this plan. So for example, sometimes kids need a cover story that the teacher tells the other kids in the class like, " Oh, Cindy, she's been sick for a couple weeks" or whatever. There needs to be a cover source so that they know I'm coming back, nobody's going to be wondering where I was because there's this story and they've got my back.

Other examples are maybe a kid is really helpful and they like to help out with the kindergarten class. So sometimes they'll go in for 30 minutes to help the kindergartners, and then the next step will be actually going into the classroom, but with the teacher only at lunchtime and then you'll move up to sitting in the actual classroom with everyone there for 30 minutes. So the point is you're incrementally stepping it up so that eventually they're back to full- time school attendance. And this is why this needs to be really tailored and individualized. And parents play such a huge role in this because again, they know their child the best.

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Michelle Horn: So when we had spoken to Brooke, she had talked about different people within this school that had been involved in developing a back to school plan. Can you speak more generally about who typically is involved in terms of setting up this plan for getting your child back to school?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Yes, of course. So it depends a little bit on the severity of the challenges. So we know that school attendance challenges sometimes can be very, very mild. They're only around transition times. They haven't been happening for very long to quite severe, kids that haven't been to school for months. Usually the first point of contact is the classroom teacher. And then the classroom teacher typically will know whether to involve the resource teacher, the school counselor, the school based team. So the other thing probably to mention at this point is it's often helpful, especially if the challenges are more severe, to have another mental health professional involved who can help navigate and stickhandle the coordination overall. So referrals to CYMH can help with that, or private mental health professionals as well.

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Bryn Askwith: Yeah, I know that was something that Brooke also shared was that some of the great techniques that were helpful to her son came from seeing a counselor who helped support them through it as part of that larger team too. So that's a great reminder.

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Michelle Horn: So thank you so much Dr. DiGiacomo for joining us today. All of this was so incredibly helpful both for setting the foundation as well as talking about those specific strategies parents can try. Before we end for today, did you have any final thoughts or words of wisdom that you'd like to share with our listeners?

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Dr. DiGiacomo: I guess I just hope that this is a hopeful message to parents who are struggling with school attendance challenges. Like I said at the beginning, it can feel very lonely and overwhelming and at the same time, there is lots of reason to be hopeful for a good outcome. One of the probably more hopeful pieces of data that I know about when it comes to parenting and challenges with kids is that the kids give us so many chances to get things right. So there is no need to get this plan perfect and to respond perfectly.

That's not what's required. What's required is a willingness to respond to what these kids needs are. And what we know is often when we make mistakes and then we repair them in the end, often what we end up with is better than what we could have had before. And that's not just my opinion, it's reflected in the data. So what I hear from patients and families is that when they're on the other side of this, when they've gotten back to school, they see it as a really connective and redemptive challenge that they've worked through as a family. And that can often be really powerful.

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Michelle Horn: Definitely. And I can vouch for that. My son's happily going back to school now and-

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Amazing.

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Michelle Horn: We talk about that within our family, he knows he has these skills for life that he can apply to other situations that if we hadn't gone through this, he would never have had that skill set.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Exactly.

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Michelle Horn: Well, thank you so much Dr. DiGiacomo.

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Dr. DiGiacomo: Thank you. This was great.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much.

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Michelle Horn: Bryn, it's been really great co- hosting this episode with you.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Michelle. Likewise. And also for our listeners, we wanted to share that today is Michelle's last regular episode as co- host with us. Michelle, you've been here since the podcast launched and you've had a chance to connect with so many health professionals. Before we get to how you're feeling, I just wanted to say, not that this is about me, but I don't know how much I can cry on audio right now on a podcast episode, but oh my goodness, we're going to miss you.

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Michelle Horn: I know, this has been such an important part of my life and professional career over the past couple of years, and it's honestly been one of the favorite parts of my job is doing this podcast with you and getting the chance to meet so many amazing guests and parents and youth and health professionals along the way. I know I've

learned a lot and it's just been such a great experience. However, you're not going to be able to get rid of me that easily. I am moving on to a new role. I'll still be with BC Children's Hospital, so I hope that perhaps you'll invite me back to perhaps co-host from time to time?

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Bryn Askwith: Oh my goodness, absolutely. You can count on it.

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Michelle Horn: Fantastic, thank you.

00:31:12

Bryn Askwith: Thank you as well to our listeners. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morans with audio engineering by Sam Seguin, audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now.

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