

Where You Are

S4 Episode 6 -

No Shortage of Questions: Talking with your child about scary news and world events

TRANSCRIPT:

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Although I can't ever promise that things are going to be fine forever, because there are things that happen in the world, you can say, "I know we're safe right now, and I know we would be able to cope if there was something going on." And that's where the parent could really help by taking charge and showing leadership, that "Bad things happen, but I will be there for you and I will have a way, a plan, to help you and to help us cope in that situation."

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

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith.

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Char Black: Part of the work that we do at BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre is to offer peer support to BC families of children and youth up to the age of 25. Our parent peer support workers receive a range of questions from parents on a number of child and youth mental health topics. So we've decided to put together three bite-size episodes of Where You Are to explore a few key topics that we get recurring questions on. We'll bring these questions to Dr. Ashley Miller who joined us last season to answer some questions from our listeners. That episode is called No Shortage of Questions: FAQs from BC Parents and Caregivers, if you want to check that out

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Bryn Askwith: For our first, Where You Are minisode, we'll discuss how to talk to your child about disturbing news like war, social injustices, or crime in our neighborhoods, as well as big scary events like wildfires and floods, without inciting fear and worry. So let's get into that conversation.

On today's episode, we have Dr. Ashley Miller, a child psychiatrist and family therapist from BC Children's Hospital. Welcome back to the podcast.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Thanks. Good morning.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Miller. It seems like in the last few years we've had no shortage of kind of big scary world events, be it pandemics, social injustices, war, climate change issues like wildfires and floods, just to name a few. These events are worrisome for adults, let alone for kids, some of which have big imaginations depending on the age and stage of development that they're at. And so we've started to get some more questions around these topics at the Kelty Centre. Dr. Miller, how do you even start conversations with your kids about big scary world events without inciting worry and fear?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: I think it's just wonderful how families are so socially conscious, and wanting to help the world be a better place, and also thinking about how to help their kids cope with these realities that we're all facing. It's just a very thoughtful, thoughtful question.

Kids are hearing things at different amounts and in different ways depending on their developmental level. So I love how you mentioned that in the intro. For a little kid, I would say that often meeting them where they're at, what they're bringing to you, what they're hearing about, is a nice way to go about it, because that way we know we're at the right developmental level. And if there's a topic that's particularly important for your family, so for example, let's say food security, then talking to them about a positive way of helping to make a difference is probably a better way to bring it up than starting with the massive scale of the problem. So maybe suggesting, "Why don't we go and volunteer together to hand out groceries to people who are in need?" Really practical things for little kids that are based more in action and things that we can do to help.

If you're talking about an older child or teenager, they're usually coming with their own concerns and anxieties, and again meeting them where they're at is a really nice place to have the conversation. We can't avoid fear. It's normal to have anxiety about climate crisis. There's no way for parents to prevent that. It's going to be there. But we can either escalate it or we can help kids manage it.

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Bryn Askwith: Meeting them where they're at is a great point around how to start the conversation and a great reminder for our listeners around that. One quick follow up question I have is if you have a child who's a worrier or has anxiety, for example, would you change anything about your approach when you're having these conversations?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Not necessarily because worriers are often thoughtful and sensitive and see the bigger picture. And in a way, if we try to dampen things down for them, the mystery of the unknown is often worse or kids who are worried will read our facial expressions and can tell if you're hiding something or trying to sugarcoat something. So I don't necessarily think of having a different approach, but just that all kids need to see the positive in the situation.

And so there's action, what you can do to help yourself, but there's also noticing the helpers, pointing out who is taking this on, role models who are doing a great job, other examples of what kids specifically have done to help in a similar circumstance. I think that's why Greta Thunberg has been such a wonderful role model for youth because you see her and they think, "Oh, I can do that too."

Another thing I'll say is I think it also depends what media you consume and how you take in the information. So it's very different to hear the worst of the worst, maybe just on the daily news or watching daily television, compared to reading a more in-depth article that looks at the nuances of the situation and might also suggest what could be helpful or going well. Because we all have to be aware, and I think this really goes for parents, how we feel when we're consuming information. Anything that creates so much fear and anxiety that you're paralyzed or so much demoralization is ultimately not going to be helpful.

So I think it's important to know what's going on, but to notice this as an adult and then you can also help your kids or teens figure out, "How are you feeling when you watch this or read this? Is this the right way to be getting this information? Is it helpful to do it on your own in your room at 9:00 at night? Or is it better to maybe be talking at the family dinner table or in class or in with some group of like-minded individuals that can actually do something and support each other?" And also giving ourselves a break. Can't all look at it all the time.

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Char Black: Thank you, Dr. Miller. Can you talk about what are some skills that parents and caregivers can teach their kids to help manage the stress or worry they might be feeling when they hear or talk about big world events?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Yeah, I think that we often talk about skills. I really think the number one tactic is to not deal with it alone. So to talk about it with friends, to talk about it with teachers, to talk about with parents. That being said, another skill is to help kids have a more realistic sense of, "Okay, this sounds terrible, but you are safe right now. It's not an actual danger." So to help differentiate what's a true immediate danger from what is an anxiety or idea of danger. And parents can reassure, "You are safe right now. You're safe in this house or apartment."

In the moment, if we're starting to feel overwhelmed, I think those really basic mindfulness skills of tuning into body and sensations are helpful. So we often feel overwhelmed because we just don't know what's going on. And taking a moment, even just one big slow deep breath out, can help calm the nervous system. Noticing like, "Oh, I'm feeling tense," or, "Oh, my heart's beating fast." And then things like progressive muscle relaxation, so tightening and loosening. I mean, there's so many wonderful quick grounding exercises and I think the Kelty Mental Health website on their mindfulness page has lots of great suggestions. So it's got to be a balance of the bigger picture stuff, where we are talking about it and finding ways to help, and the day-to-day grounding, coping, and being realistic about the actual risk in the moment.

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Char Black: Great. Thank you, Dr. Miller.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Miller, we have an audio clip from a parent sharing a question on this topic, so I'm wondering if we can just take a quick listen to that now together.

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Speaker 1: My youngest came home from school having talked about climate change and the increase in wildfires and floods. Glad they were talking about these current events, but then they said, " We live in a community with lots of older trees and forests near us. Could our neighborhood and home be destroyed in a wildfire too?" What do you say to that? I mean, I guess that could happen. I want them to feel safe, but I also want to be honest.

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Bryn Askwith: So, Dr. Miller, hearing that question, you spoke just a little bit about reassuring your child and that balance between things you can do to help and then just recognizing the actual alarm, false alarm. Is there danger? Is there not? So how do you reassure a child like this in this moment, even if you can't promise that these things won't happen to them?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: I really like leading with some kind of validating statement. So acknowledging the experience of the child rather than jumping right away to reassurance. So something like, "Oh my goodness, you sound really worried about this. And I don't blame you because there was so much in the news about fire last year. And you really care about our neighborhood and our home . And although I can't ever promise that things are going to be fine forever, because there are things that happen in the world, I know that that is pretty rare." You can say, "I know we're safe right now and I know we would be able to cope if there was something going on." And that's where the parent can really help by taking charge and showing leadership, that, " bad things happen. But I will be there for you and I will have a plan to help you and to help us cope in that situation."

So you might talk about your fire safety plan. You might talk about the concrete steps that you would take, if needed, to keep the family safe. And then how you would handle it thereafter might be too much for a kid in that moment. Usually they just want to know there's a plan. And then you can redirect towards, "This sounds like something you're pretty concerned about. I wonder if there's anything we can do together to try to make this situation better. Should we look at who is working on fire

safety in the community or what are other things we can do?" So you address the fear, but you channel some of that energy towards the positive, so that that becomes the focus as opposed to the constant worry about what could happen.

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Char Black: I love how you talked about the coping plan and just having the parent there to reassure the child. I really love that. Dr. Miller, do you have any other final thoughts or words of wisdom for our listeners?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: I think as hard as it is to accept, we've all been through this huge uncertainty of the pandemic. It's not really over and we have lots of uncertainty. And uncertainty is inherent in life. It's hard to accept, but it's part of life and it's a part of life just like everything else that's hard to talk about. That we can discuss with our kids, "No matter how much we try to guess, no matter how much we try to plan, we never know exactly what's going to happen. And that can be scary, but it's also wonderful because great things happen. There are surprises. We don't know. But what I do know is we're here for you. We're going to figure this out together. And I believe in our whole community."

And actually maybe if it feels true to you, even talking about, "I believe in the goodness and the resourcefulness of people in general. Look at the scientists who've found the vaccines, look at the advocates and leaders who are making the world better." So we want to not over-reassure about uncertainty, but we do want to reassure about the inherent goodness of people and our capacity to solve big problems together.

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Bryn Askwith: And that is such an amazing takeaway. Thank you so much, Dr. Miller, for joining us on this episode.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: It was so nice to be here.

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Bryn Askwith: You can find any of the resources mentioned in today's episode in our show notes. And if you're looking for more resources on child and youth mental health

and wellness, head to our website, kelymentalhealth.ca, where you'll find videos, webinar recordings, toolkits, information sheets, and more for parents and caregivers.

Char, it's been great co-hosting this minisode with you. And thanks to our Where You Are listeners, glad you've tuned in with us today.

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Char Black: Thanks, Bryn. 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 Morantz 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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