

February 25, 2021

# Concerned About Your Child's Learning?

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:00:00] Welcome to Voices of Compassion, CHC's podcast series providing courage, connection and compassion, highlighting topics that matter to our community, our parents, families, educators and other professionals. I'm Cindy Lopez, today's session is focused on kids and distance learning. With school at home, parents have a window into their child's learning and behavior that they've not had before. As a parent, you may have observed some behaviors that make you pause or cause concern. Listen to this podcast episode with Chris Harris, Chief Schools Officer at CHC, as he shares his expertise with you about what might be cause for concern and what is not. You'll walk away with ideas about possible next steps as you consider what is best for your child.

[00:00:52] Chris is also doing an ask the expert session live on the topic of returning to school at 4:00 pm on February 23rd. So you'll want to mark your calendars for that virtual live session. You can find out more or register at [chconline.org/community-education](http://chconline.org/community-education). Chris, is there anything you'd like to add?

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:01:16] My entire professional career has been working with kids who have special challenges. Previously I have taught in schools that have youngsters with specific learning differences, I did that for 12 years, then I went into administration. My most recent jobs at CHC have been with the Esther B. Clark school that I was the director of for 15 years, and I have just rejoined Sand Hill School about a year ago.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:01:44] So right now and for the past year, parents really have had a front row seat to their kids' learning. So Chris, can you tell us about some of the things parents might be observing during distance learning that might be cause for concern or not?

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:01:57] So one of the things that parents might look for is not an acute logging off cause all kids are getting Zoom exhausted these days, but if you watch your youngster consistently logging off or not engaged in a particular class, usually that's going to be an English class or a math class, that might be something that you take note of. In fact, they'll probably tell you they hate the class and that's why they don't want to be on it, but the fact of the matter is they hate the class because there's probably something that they can't do that they're being asked to do. So, it's looking more at a pattern than it is

on a one day deal where they're just exhausted and they don't feel like getting on. We have seen firsthand for sure that kids do experience Zoom fatigue, and they need time, they need a mental health break from it. And so I think we need, I do think we need to respect that.

[00:02:52] Another area you might be concerned with parents is if a youngster actually chooses the assignments they do and consistently avoids doing a particular topic or a particular subject assignment. And they're just not doing them you know and they're saying, well, they're not making it clear, you're going to hear plethoras of reasons that they're not doing it, but you have to go to the default to say there's something that they can't do that they're being asked to do and that's why they're using these avoidant behaviors.

[00:03:25] Third thing to keep track of, that's important is looking at the onset of chronic, sort of aches and pains like the headache and the stomachache or the itchy eyes or you know the sudden need to go to the bathroom at the same time in the same class all the time. All of these can be what we call somatic responses and they indicate that a youngster is feeling an elevated level of stress or anxiety about their own performance and their ability to perform competently enough in that class. This is a very classic anxiety and fear based response when kids are anxious, when they're having difficulty believing that they're going to be successful on an assignment because it gets them emotional relief if they're acknowledged for having those, those pains.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:04:16] Yeah, so parents are looking for patterns of behavior then just kind of one-offs, so that's helpful. Also I'm just wondering about parents who might be seeing more behavior challenges like outbursts. I guess that could be a result of Zoom fatigue, or it could be a result of some kind of learning or social emotional challenge.

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:04:39] Outbursts typically happen Cindy when people are pushing hard on something that the kids have already indicated more subtly they can't do. Outbursts are certainly indicators of a youngster who has tried to communicate typically that they can't do something and they haven't been heard or understood or believed or whatever. And so the next step is this more regressed behavior and what we're trying to do here is look at what we call the antecedents, like what led up to that and what subtle indications, where kids giving that they couldn't do something and still they were being plugged or prodded to do more of something they couldn't do.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:05:24] So Chris talking about all these behaviors parents might be seeing, what can they do? What can they do if they're observing some of these behaviors with their kids?

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:05:34] So the first thing that parents need to do is in fact track the behaviors that they're seeing in the youngster. If they've seen patterns, you know, logging off or shutting down or refusing to get into a class or not doing an assignment that they know has been assigned, tracking that data, so a teacher can ultimately see that this is a consistent behavior with a pattern. So my suggestion is that you really want to ask for a 30 minute consultation with that teacher offline or on Zoom separately so that you can relay the issues that they're having.

[00:06:11] And in that you want to do some problem solving with the teacher: is it too much, can an assignment be modified, can they use a different modality to be able to express back to the teacher what they're doing, is there any flexibility for a youngster to get some prescribed notes and so that they don't have to take notes over the computer if that's a struggle. So all of these kinds of things are discussions with a teacher instead of just quickly going to, oh my goodness my kid needs special education and let's jump to that. So that's the first step. Now, if the issues persist and you've tried a couple of discussions, you know, with the teacher you've agreed upon some accommodations or some adjustments that can be made and it's not having any impact, then you might want to consider a more formal assessment.

[00:07:03] If you're an independent school, you're probably gonna be looking for a private assessment and Children's Health Council has that service available where we can do a full scale, psychological educational battery of testing. If you're in the public school you may want to petition the special education director. You have to do that in writing, requesting an assessment for your youngster to see if they are eligible and needing public school special education services. So I'd start there, I think that's really important, and the input that parents have and the data they can share with teachers before you even go to this more formal level, I would really recommend, because those negotiations can sometimes actually keep a youngster engaged and involved in their mainstream class instead of having to go to such an alternate route, there are excellent alternate routes incidentally, but if you're committed to wanting your youngster to remain in a mainstream setting, go with the discussions with your teacher first.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:08:06] So, just to piggyback too on something that you referenced. So here at CHC, we do as Chris mentioned, a psychological educational evaluation for students, we also

have free 30-minute consultations for parents, and that might be another place to start if you're having concerns, but not sure about next steps.

[00:08:26] So, Chris you referenced special ed and so if students have received an evaluation, they've already been assessed or they have an IEP, Individual Education Plan, comes out of the public school system. As a parent, how do I know that my student is getting what they need in the distance learning process if they already have the evaluation?

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:08:49] So let's start with the public school sector cause that's the easier, easier one to describe. So if the youngster has an IEP, there is a clearly depicted service page, which exhibits the frequency and duration of the special education services they are to receive. So the easiest thing for parents to document and monitor is are they receiving those as are on the IEP? That's actually a legally binding part of the IEP that those youngsters are receiving those services. So for example, really simply if they are to receive 30 minutes a week of occupational therapy, then the parents should know the day and the time that that is scheduled and that the youngster is logged on and getting ready for that system, and the occupational therapist is present on Zoom and providing that service for the 30 minutes each week. Then of course, a key part of the IEP goals. One of the things at CHC, in both at Esther B. Clark school and at Sand Hill School even it's called a personalized plan, we tend to be very cautious about how many goals we're asking kids to address. And so if you have an IEP that has 15 goals, you know, it's probably worth having a discussion with the special education teacher or the people who are responsible for administering that, to prioritize those so that you as the monitoring parent and the youngster, who's trying to, you know, improve their performance in school have what we call chewable bite, which is usually between three, maybe four, rarely five goals that everybody is working on because you prioritize those as having the biggest bang for the buck. So for example, if the youngster is really having oral language expressive problems, and there is some speech therapy goals to help youngsters be able to communicate with peers more successfully and the 15th goal is Billy's not putting periods at the end of sentences, you probably want to emphasize the social skills that the youngster needs to sustain friendships and say, let's put the periods and the capital letters aside for a little while so that we work on the things that are going to be A) more important for the youngster in terms of long success and B) will give you a bigger bang for them in terms of making process, so that's the public side.

[00:11:17] On the private side, typically the psych ed batteries reports that I see will have a diagnosis and so it could be attention deficit disorder, or you might see dyslexia,

you might see disorder of written language, and those are informative, but they actually don't tell you what you need to do. So in the next part of the report, typically the psychometrist or the team that's done the testing lists recommendations. And just like the IEP goals, one of the things that we have to be careful about is how many recommendations can practically be applied. So again here, I think you want to take a look at those recommendations ideally with the teacher who's going to be doing most of the teaching and say, you know which top five do we agree upon would be the ones that we want to pay the most attention to that we want to develop a plan for addressing. And then as things get resolved, you replace it with one more, but you know, I think for any teacher to think that they're going to manage 15 IEP goals or 30 recommendations and have anything actually tangibly transpire, is actually not feasible. Ideally too, the top priorities that you have would have some measure of outcomes. So parents and teachers, and even our students alike, would be able to see that they're making progress that there's some kind of data that goes along with looking at those recommendations and their IEP goals that would help youngsters see and parents see that they're actually making tangible progress.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:12:52] Thank you for tuning in! Just a note, before we continue on with today's episode, we hope you're following us on social media, so you don't need to wait a whole week between episodes to get engaging, inspiring and educational content from CHC. Our social handles are linked on our podcast webpage at [podcasts.chconline.org](http://podcasts.chconline.org).

[00:13:15] What are some alternatives if students are not being successful? So for example, one alternative might be a School like Sand Hill School, you know, Sand Hill school, specialized school here at CHC designed especially for kids with learning and attention challenges. Obviously that's, that's one option on kind of one end of the continuum, there are probably several, and just wondering if you could talk a little bit with parents or with our listeners about what those alternatives might be.

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:13:47] Sure, so, you know, taking a youngster out of a school and changing them, especially into a special school is a very significant decision for parents. If the child who's struggling academically has a very solid group of friends, that sustained, that are reliable, that the youngster feels great about, that are always there for support and, or they're involved in extracurricular activities, we need to be careful about taking kids out of those environments, where they actually feel a sense of belongingness and are thriving in that aspect as hard as academics may be. So what I oftentimes talk to parents about is, it's when the youngster begins to feel ostracized or neglected or ignored, or their friends are disappearing on them or they can't find a niche to socialize,

and so they find themselves by themselves a lot. So losing the sense of community and belongingness in a school environment is a serious red flag. And so alternative schools are set up because they specialize in working with youngsters who have particular kinds of challenges. Like for example, the Oak School up in Marin works with youngsters with autism and at Sand Hill and Charles Armstrong we work with youngsters who have specific language learning differences, at Esther B. Clark, they're working with youngsters who have emotional dysregulation issues.

[00:15:16] And what happens is that these youngsters could find like peers who have all the talents and attributes that they possess and haven't been able to be realized or nurtured while also seeing youngsters who are having the same kinds of struggles in the classroom. And in these kinds of schools, you have then very specifically trained specialists. And so a youngster who feels like nobody understands them come face-to-face with both peers and teachers who do understand that youngster. And so we can restore in these schools, the sense of belongingness and community and inclusion that these youngsters are desperate for and want their school experience to include.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:16:03] So thanks so much for spending some time with us today Chris, and sharing your insights and expertise with us. I'm wondering, if there was one thing that you hope our listeners would take away from this episode, what would that be?

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:16:21] Actually, I haven't used the word yet, but I'm going to use the word patience. We talked about how you can track and observe your youngsters and look for patterns and trends. We've talked about how you can take steps, incremental steps towards improving your youngsters engagement and success. And positive feelings about school, even in distance learning and all of that takes time, there's no quick answer. And just to put it out there, this pandemic is not going to suddenly be over and we're going to be back to normal. There will inevitably be social, academic and psychological factors that linger past whenever we define the pandemic as being over. And so we're going to have to be patient with people and patient with our kids, patience with ourselves, and even patient with the people that we're trying to access in terms of testing and the teachers, because I just want to end by saying this: nobody's not doing the very best they know how to do with the information we have right now. It may change in a week, but everybody's doing the best they can with what they've got in the moment. And so I'm asking people to be patient, doesn't mean you're not persistent, it doesn't mean you back out, it just means things aren't going to happen immediately and we need to understand that.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:17:43] Yeah, thank you for that reminder and as you talk about patience, I'm also reminded of compassion. That was, we've talked a lot about that, obviously on our Voices of Compassion podcast series, compassion for your child, trying to, you know, just understand kind of more of the functions of the behavior, like, why are they doing that? If they could, they would, right and also some self-compassion.

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:18:06] There's always a can't behind a won't, and I think that's one of the things I also want to leave people with is when kids won't do something, usually there's a component underneath there which is a can't and they don't want to embarrass themselves or disappoint anybody including themselves and so it's a won't.

**Cindy Lopez:**

[00:18:24] Thank you. And if you'd like to find out more about an option like Sand Hill School, at Children's Health Council might be a viable option for your child. If you're interested, please sign up for a free no obligation tour of Sand Hill, all virtual at nine o'clock on Thursday mornings, and you can find a link on our podcast website to get you to sign up for that tour. So, Chris, thank you so much for joining us today and to our listeners thank you as well.

**Chris Harris, MEd:**

[00:18:56] Thanks so much!