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How to Connect With Your Teen: Communicating with Curiosity and Compassion

Cindy Lopez:

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. My name is Cindy Lopez, today we're talking about parenting teens. Our teens are struggling right now for lots of reasons and parents are really grappling with how to respond and support their teens in a meaningful way. Our teens want to connect and be heard, which can be difficult in this time of competing demands in which parents are juggling multiple roles and the lines between home and school and work are all a bit more blurred than usual. So how can you be a sounding board for your teen and really connect with them without trying to fix the problem? Listen in to this podcast episode with Jennifer Leydecker, licensed marriage and family therapist and clinical manager at CHC as she shares her experience and expertise from years of working with teens. She'll talk about important strategies and tools that you can use to communicate and connect with your teen. Welcome Jen, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners as we get started?

[00:01:18] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

I am a mom of three kids and so in the busy world that we're in right now that's always in the background and then working at CHC for almost five years now primarily with teens has been really awesome and it's where I, I like to spend a lot of my time.

[00:01:36] **Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah thanks so much for making the time to talk with us today. So, as you already mentioned Jen you have a lot of experience working with teens in a mental health setting. Can you share a little bit about what teens are currently experiencing based on what you're seeing?

[00:01:53] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

Yeah so in the program that I work in RISE we are seeing teens that are not only navigating school in the switch for some of them from being off campuses for over a year, the anxiety of going back and seeing people in person again and what the new normal is going to be. Also many teens have been able to navigate social relationships over the span of being in shelter in place and all of the COVID restrictions and things like that and getting really used to seeing people through technology and now that that changes again. And so those two things I think are the main stressors right now and then still being a teenager and navigating all the things that being a teenager means and figuring out their identity and defining who they are in this kind of upside down time that we're in.

So Jen, I can imagine being a parent of a teen and trying to figure out like where to start, how do I communicate, how do I connect? You mentioned RISE, R-I-S-E, RISE is the name of our intensive outpatient program at CHC that we do in collaboration with Stanford; so it's RISE, IOP and you can find out more information about that on our website at chconline.org. I know that parents are seeing their teens going through a lot this year, what's helpful for parents to do and what's not so helpful for parents to do?

I think in terms of what is helpful for parents to do is to increase communication in a way that doesn't appear as though they are overstepping kind of the regular boundaries of teens, but trying to get a clear read sometimes on what is happening for the teen, what's their experience like in terms of managing school, managing friends, if they're noticing a change in behaviors or like an increased irritability or withdrawing from family and friends. Approaching with curiosity and compassion is really important in terms of having an open discussion versus the teen feeling like they are being put on the spot or having to answer one more question about what's wrong can feel really overwhelming especially in the times that we're in. I think many people are on edge, parents and teens and so coming from curiosity and compassion can definitely open the door versus closing it. And sometimes as parents our worries about what's going on can definitely take the forefront in the way that we start having conversations, and so sometimes it's taking a minute and going through our own thoughts and concerns before trying to step into a conversation with our teen.

And so what are the things that we are worried about versus what are the facts that we're seeing in our teen that we can then go to them and ask questions about. I think the other piece too is we've all kind of hit our limit in terms of change and navigating multiple changes and a lot going on and navigating multiple roles as parents and as teens. And so trying to have these conversations at a time when emotions aren't high is also really important for both sides. At the end of the day as a parent I know I do not

have the well of energy and compassion that can sometimes be needed in these tough conversations and so trying to find a time that's a little bit less stressful or starting the conversation and then making an agreement to come back to it can also be something that's really important.

[00:06:16]**Cindy Lopez:**

I really liked that combination of curiosity and compassion and I also think about parents keeping the conversation to what they're observing like behavior that they're seeing versus assuming how their teen might be feeling because of what they're seeing?

[00:06:33] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

Yeah in RISE we are a comprehensive dialectical behavioral therapy program and one of those main components is mindfulness and we talk about our skills often in terms of observe and describe and with describe it's what am I seeing with my five senses because what that removes are the assumptions that we're making and the interpretations of behavior that we see and so in wanting to have that conversation using the described skill of I'm noticing you are spending more time in your bedroom or I'm noticing your friends have come over a couple of different times in the last few days just to hang out and you don't want to spend time with them. So, can we talk about that and so bringing it up in a way that it's not like you're ignoring people or you're withdrawing or you're isolating because those feel like the teens have to be on the attack and it comes with our interpretation of those behaviors. It doesn't leave space for the teen to you more information and so in those pieces using just what you're observing through your five senses: how are they speaking, what are the words they're choosing to use when you are able to talk with them, what are the hygiene components. And I think for a lot of teens hygiene kind of slipped a little bit because they don't have to get completely dressed up to go on Zoom and it takes a lot of energy that sometimes they just don't have and so talking through that with them and just observations and those kinds of conversations can really open the door for you to get information versus deciding ahead of time what isn't right at the moment.

Cindy Lopez:

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.

When we hear from parents they're really interested in like how do I have those conversations, what are some concrete examples you can show me or share with me

so I really appreciate that. I'm wondering, what are you hearing from teens about what they want from their parents right now?

[00:09:10] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

I think a lot of our teens are talking about wanting to be seen so that I think is a key piece where we each have our own responsibilities on a day-to-day basis, and even though we're spending so much more time in our homes with one another, it's being able to be seen for who they are because part of what they're missing from school is that recognition of who they are as an individual that they would usually get from their peers. So that social reinforcement that a lot of our teens would get just from being on campus and being with their peer groups, they aren't getting those same moments in time of being identified as an individual, being seen as what they are seeing themselves as can be really important and really validating and so acknowledging the way that they're putting themselves together through the day, who they are as an individual, what are the characteristics that make them up versus the things that they're not doing. So really connecting in that way I think is what the teens are looking for.

[00:10:27] **Cindy Lopez:**

I think it's really important for parents to hear that, like what did their teens want or need from them right now. So if parents know that, how can they respond in a meaningful way with their teens and maybe you can provide some examples?

[00:10:43] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

I think opening the door to conversations is frequently the place to start and so if you're noticing that your teen is asking for a different hairstyle or they're wanting to get their ears pierced or do things like that, that are shifting their identity or their presentation outwardly of who they are, talking about it in that same kind of realm of curiosity and compassion to get an understanding what's driving that because I think the piece too is as parents we sometimes push aside I don't want to say forget cause we remember what it was like to be a teenager, but we kind of push aside those moments of I tried really hard to become the person I am, I tried on different identities, I did different things and our fashion styles might not have always been the best in terms of what the teens would judge us for now, but the idea that we tried different things as teenagers and that's what they're looking for and for that understanding. And so getting a sense as to what's going on inside for them and how can they openly talk about it in a way that doesn't feel that they're being judged. And so you may not agree and this I think is the key piece is you don't have to agree with their decision. You can validate that you understand why they want to do something different. You can understand why it makes sense that they want to try out a different hair color because that's something that a lot of people are doing and it's also something that can demonstrate a different side of their

identity. It doesn't mean that you have to give them permission. And I think sometimes that feels different for parents in that well if I can understand why then doesn't that mean that I'm telling them that it's okay and those two things don't meet in the middle all the time, you can understand why a teenager would want to spend the night out and about and also not allow them to do that and so I think those are key pieces that sometimes keeping in mind is you can have a conversation and listen without it changing your values around specific things as a parent.

[00:13:11] **Cindy Lopez:**

I'm just thinking about the parents having conversations with their teens and especially if it's something that parents feel very strongly about and the teen may feel very strongly about too in a totally different way. Do you have any tips for parents about how to kind of start that conversation and I don't know if it's possible but to kind of leave their own strong opinions aside for now?

[00:13:40] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

So we use validation often and it's a really important skill for us in terms of the parent and teen relationships because it is the way to move the conversation in a direction that can feel more productive, right. We use curfew as a frequent example or cell phone privileges, but the idea is you can understand why your teen would want to keep their cell phone in their room and have access to their electronic device all night long. And some of our parents and we're big on sleep hygiene know that having electronics in your bedroom might not be the best choice in terms of good sleep hygiene. And so they may have really strong beliefs about that and you can hold that line and still validate, I know you want to have contact with your friends or I know that you play games on your phone in order to fall asleep or you listen to music, can we find a workaround? So by acknowledging it, it sometimes allows the conversation to go in a different direction as opposed to two sides of the battlefield digging in. And so for us I would say that validation is definitely the place to start and I think also knowing, do you have room to negotiate. Like you're holding this line really firmly can you negotiate a little bit on that. Is there something small that you'd offer your teen. It doesn't have to be a big leap It can just be a tiny little step.

[00:15:21] **Cindy Lopez:**

That listening piece and the validating piece are really good tools to have and then kind of repeating what you heard them say that's also helpful because there might be some miscommunication in that

[00:15:39] **Jennifer Leydecker, LMFT:**

We take in information and we interpret things really really quickly and so in those

conversations sometimes on both sides it can be really helpful to reflect back. So what I'm hearing you tell me is one of your friends is having a really hard time right now and you want to be able to support them. And that's why you want to have your phone in your room, right. So really kind of keying in on what's important to them that they're saying in the conversation that reflecting back can open the door.

[00:16:08] **Cindy Lopez:**

Jen, thanks so much for making the time to talk with us today on this important topic. And I'm wondering if there's one thing that you hope our listeners would take away from this episode, what would that be?

Making space to have these conversations. So if there is a concern and you want to bring it to your teen, setting the conversation up in a way that you have kind of taken time as a parent to leave some of the other day-to-day stressors at the door. If that means going for a walk for five minutes before you have the conversation or doing some breathing activities or watching some funny videos to kind of bring your own emotions down I think that's important, checking with the teen too and kind of front-loading them, I want to have this conversation I'm noticing these things, are you in a space where you're open to having this conversation and being compassionate about the fact that a lot of our stress levels are high right now. And so finding a time where both people can be in a space to have an open conversation and an honest conversation around what's happening is really important. And then I think the other piece is, conversations don't have to happen face to face. I think sometimes some of the best conversations happen in the car while driving or on the couch next to one another watching a show together where it feels a little bit more relaxed, you're not staring at one another. And so finding a way to have a conversation side by side sometimes can be a little bit less stressful and it takes the tone of the conversation down a little bit too. And so finding those kind of natural ways to start a conversation can also feel like there's less weight to it.

[00:18:01] **Cindy Lopez:**

Such great advice thank you for sharing all of your experience and insights with us today And just want to reiterate again to our listeners if you want to find out more about the RISE IOP that Jen mentioned you can find more online at chconline.org. Also if you're concerned about your teen and you're not sure if you need to seek additional help or not we do offer free 30- minute parent consultations. And you can just come in and talk with one of our clinicians about what's going on and they can provide some advice and guidance regarding next steps. We'll list all of those resources in the show notes so you can easily find those and access the information you want. Thank you to

our listeners I hope you'll join us again next week for our next voices of compassion podcast episode.