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To College or Not to College?

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. I'm Cindy Lopez and today we're talking college. Are you as a parent wondering if college is the right option for your teen? Communication is key to supporting your child as they consider whether or not college is right for them. We are honored to welcome Katie Reeves a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner as a guest today on our podcast series. She has lots of experience talking with teens and their parents about all kinds of issues, including this important issue about college or not? Thank you for joining us today Katie.

Katherine Reeves:

Well, I'm so pleased to be here. I am a nurse practitioner, I work with families all the time mostly with adolescents, that's my niche. I have a lot of conversations about college and kind of what happens after high school, so I'm really excited about this conversation.

Cindy Lopez:

Great, thanks, thank you for joining us Katie. We're really excited to have you too and we haven't had this kind of college conversation before, so this is great. As we think about families and teens and parents who are thinking about college right now or you know, finishing up high school and trying to figure out what's next, what's your advice to parents about how they can communicate with their child about college and about whether or not it's the right option?

Katherine Reeves:

So I think whenever we talk about college or even community college or trade school or work right after high school, oftentimes we look for the right answer, what is the right thing for my kid. And so I think especially with everything that is unknown with COVID and the times, it's really important to try and understand how to figure out with your kid and what are strategies for figuring out with your kid, what is best for them, rather than an overarching, yes college is always the best option or no it's not worth your time right now. And like you said, communication is key and I know working with 17, 18, 19 year old's communication can be extraordinarily difficult, not because they aren't capable or we aren't capable, but only because there are so many other things going on in a developing brain and also in a parent's brain when you have kids that age.

So in terms of kind of like key components to communication one of the strategies that I use all the time with families is identifying goals: what are the goals for college, what are the goals for even the conversation about college and aligning on those goals. So I've talked to a lot of parents who say, obviously the goal of college is to set my child up for success in adulthood. I talked to a lot of teenagers who say the goal of college is to make friends and figure out what they like in the world and you know be close to the beach or be in a big city or something that is not necessarily as holistic as the idea of creating a foundational base for your future.

Cindy Lopez:

Yeah, they are totally not on the same wavelength.

Katherine Reeves:

Right, exactly and so when you have different goals, between the teen and the parent, sometimes conversations about logistics become really hard. So you can imagine if you're trying to say well, you know, maybe the best idea is to take a gap year or as a parent, I'm saying to my kid maybe the best idea is to go to this four year university when your teen wants to take a gap year. If you're not able to say okay well, what do I think you're going to get out of this experience to achieve that goal, then that conversation just kind of becomes an argument about something entirely different, right. You're kind of missing each other in that conversation. We do want to align teens and parents in their goals kind of first and foremost, and it becomes the most effective strategy for beginning a conversation.

Cindy Lopez:

If goals are different, which it sounds likely, then what does that conversation look like between the parents and the child?

Katherine Reeves:

So I think the first thing that you can do is enter the conversation, asking questions without making assumptions, cause assumptions kind of generate some pushback and say, well you don't, you're not listening to me, right. Kids want to feel validated, teens especially want to feel validated. And so entering the conversation, it can be really useful to come in with questions saying, what do you want? What are your goals after high school? What are the things that you want to get out of the next four to five, six years? And allowing your kid to answer that. Maybe there's a snarky remark in there, maybe not, maybe they're stressed, maybe they're assuming that college is the end all be all and we'll decide their future, which a lot of these kids also think, and being able to acknowledge kind of what the current status is in terms of this conversation is going to be the best starting off point.

You can go to your kid and say you know what, I'm a little nervous to talk to you about this cause I think you're going to shut down and I really don't want you to shut down. That can be a really disarming and really nice thing for, you know, your teen to hear is that you're being honest with them and you're saying I'm nervous about this conversation or I'm feeling frustrated because all I want to do is help and I don't really know how [yeah]. It's a perfect time for parents to kind of show how human they are.

Cindy Lopez:

So in your experience Katie, when there is a difference between what parents want and what the kids want, as they think about life beyond high school, I can see even if there is some open and honest conversation, they still may be kind of at impasse [mhmm] because parents are going to think, no, I really know that this is the right thing for you and the kid is like [right] not right for me [right]. So what happens then?

Katherine Reeves:

So in any kind of potentially controversial conversation you're going to have with your teen, I always recommend kind of this two step process of first you validate and then you reorient to whatever you think reality is, right. And this is something I use kind of in every conversation that I have with anybody actually, it's really important to validate the concerns of the other person, people's feelings, you're validating feelings. And I know feelings is you know, sometimes a taboo word, especially in logistics conversations, but it is really important, especially with 17, 18, 19 year olds. So if a kid's coming in and saying, I don't want to go to college, or I know exactly where I want to go and the parent's thinking something different, the best thing the parent can do is try and understand the feelings that are behind that opinion. So if your teen is saying, I need to go to community college because all my friends are going to Foothill, even though I got into you know, UC Santa Barbara, right, that conversation isn't necessarily going to go well if the parents disregarding maybe the reasons behind that decision that your kid is making.

So if you can say, I understand you want to be close to your friends. Of course, you want to be close to your friends and then you put yourself in their shoes, you think well yeah, it would be really hard to know one group of people for four years, which at 18 is a huge piece of your life and have to think about going somewhere different, that would be so difficult. And if you can express that to them and say, I understand what you're thinking about that and show them, you know, explain it a lot. And then I also tell parents you know you're being validating when your kid starts to say, "yeah, yeah, exactly!" And they will, they'll get excited about hearing you repeat back to them exactly what they're saying to you. Once you have validated and only once you have validated and sometimes it's one sentence and sometimes it's you know, two hours of

conversation once that validation is there, once your kid is saying, yeah, yeah, okay, you get it, like I get that you get it, that's when you can say, now hear me out, right.

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.

I really appreciate your advice and your expertise around how parents can have conversations with their kids about hard things, and additionally, if their kids are struggling with mental health and/or learning challenges, sometimes I think they can get into this situation where the kid feels like I can do this, like totally confident about their potential success, where parents are feeling like no, I don't, I'm not seeing that. So if they are kind of in that space where the parent knows that the child has some challenges, the child knows too, right, but the kid thinks that you know, it's going to be great, I got this and the parents just don't have the same confidence. What happens then?

Katherine Reeves:

I mean Cindy it's a great question and in kind of even at a broader spectrum, what do you do when your kids are struggling with mental health problems prior to leaving home, right? It's terrifying, it's terrifying for the kid, it's terrifying for the parent and terrifying honestly for the providers too right, we want to give the right advice moving forward. And I think one of the biggest issues that I see, I mean we talk about this constantly in clinic, we want to make sure that we are empowering these teens and letting them know that they can do hard things. So we don't want to say, oh well because you're struggling with mental health problems we think that you should forever live with your parents cause that's not empowering and it's also not true, right. People function with mental health problems all into adulthood, especially things like anxiety, depression you know that kind of come in and out or have bouts that are worse than others, like we want to be able to give these teenagers the right idea about being able to take care of themselves and knowing that you can still have supports in college or living on your own in whatever setting that is. That being said, there are scenarios and situations where, you know there might be an acuity of an illness that is much higher that needs a lot more support, like the intervention of a parent kind of on a more regular basis. And in those circumstances, maybe it is more useful for that kid to stay at home.

And I think the most important piece of advice that I can give is not to make that decision too early. I have conversations all the time with parents who are you know,

rightfully terrified about the next steps for their child, maybe a year before they go to college or maybe even two years before they go to college, they'll say, I don't think that my kid's ready. We have no idea and if they're talking to me about it, it usually means their kid's getting help and in treatment already, right. And so if they're in treatment that's a really good sign that they're on their way to get better. And so if we have a group around them, if they are engaging in treatment, if they're engaging in therapy or medication management or whatever it is, there's a likelihood that they're going to think differently about what they're prepared to do, in three months, six months, a year down the line. And so if we're saying a year out, you know what, you're not ready for college that can be one of those kind of damning conversations that feels really hard and heavy on a teen, especially a teen that's already going through mental health struggles.

So I always tell parents you know, if kids are struggling with school, if they're struggling getting their apps in, if they're struggling with you know, doing things on their own and it's making you concerned about their future, just remind them how cool it is that they're trying to get better [yeah] in that in and of itself is really empowering.

Cindy Lopez:

Yes, that's a great, I love that. Thinking about, so that's that conversation where the child might be ready, thinking they're ready and the parent's like what, maybe not. It's really wise, as you said to not make it that decision a year out, right. I mean, that's kind of the conundrum with college applications, right. You're trying to make decisions for a year down the road and it's important just to remember that and keep that all in perspective. So I really appreciate those reminders too. So you have, on one hand you have the child that's totally confident, determined and ready to go. Well, what if you have the child or the son or daughter that is really not confident and really doubtful and like, I don't think I can do this, it's like overwhelming to think about, what happens then?

Katherine Reeves:

I'm so glad you asked that. I actually this week, only a couple of days ago, I had a 15 year-old boy, kind of stopped me at the beginning of one of our appointments and he said, do you think I can go to college? Like do you think I can do this because I don't think that I can. And I said no, I don't, you're 15. I think it was just such a good example of how much pressure, which of course we talk about all the time, but how much pressure these kids are under to plan their future and to decide, what comes after high school.

Are they going to be able to get into college and if you get into college, do you get into a good enough college to you know build this life off of and unfortunately I do think even when parents are you know, really levelheaded about talking to their kids about this,

there's just so much culturally that seeps in at school and in friend groups and in extracurriculars that emphasizes kind of an individual's worth based on where they go to school.

And so I get a lot of kids coming in with a ton of doubt really early on about their ability to even engage in college. And so I think these are the times when, you know, if kids are really concerned about their ability to do college, I think this is a really wonderful time for parents to kind of take their hand and say, you know what, we believe in you, like we think you're going to be able to do this and no, we're not going to just throw you out of the nest or whatever it is, we're not going to just say good luck, like freshmen in college like that's a time when your hand is being held by a lot of people, right. And remind them that being nervous about this transition is totally typical and expected and there are things that we can put in place to make it easier.

Cindy Lopez:

So Katie thinking about the child who might be doubtful or not confident about going to college or you know even a decision about what comes next after high school, through this COVID lens that we are living in right now, I think there's an added sense of uncertainty, so students who are dealing with some mental health challenges the time in which we're living might just add more stressors. Are there any hints or tips you might give about that?

Katherine Reeves:

So much is unknown about the future, which I think to an adult can be very stressful, to an 18 year-old in transition, it can be overwhelming, the idea that they don't know what's coming next. I mean we all kind of understand that in that transition, but to not know what's coming next because there's a global crisis and every school is doing something different to combat it. And you know, some of my friends are shipped off to school and some of them are having to stay home and do everything online. And am I going to get this experience that I expected or not and you know, how am I going to make friends, all that kind of thing. Like it is extraordinarily overwhelming and so one of the things I've been talking a lot to my teens about is it's okay to not really be okay with this right now. And parents, it's probably best for them to reiterate this, right. If your kid looks a little off, that's probably an appropriate response to the world right now, it is kind of a mess, right. We all feel it and same with parents, right. It's okay to not be okay for a minute. And sort of remind them, you know, we don't expect you to know what to do right now, cause literally no one knows what to do right now. And I think a lot of the conversations I've had with teens that you know go down that, that direction, there's a lot of relief that comes with knowing that no one really knows what to do [yeah] and it's okay to not be okay. There's a lot of relief.

Cindy Lopez:

That's great, that's a good reminder.

Katherine Reeves:

We all need it, huh?

Cindy Lopez:

Yeah, [yeah] everyday, little voice in my ear.

Katherine Reeves:

Right, exactly.

Cindy Lopez:

So Katie, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing from your experience and expertise. I'm wondering if there is one thing that you hope that our listeners would take away from this episode, what would that be?

Katherine Reeves:

Yeah, I think college is not the end all be all, you know for anybody and there's probably a bunch of good options. That's the other thing, figuring out with your kid what to do is a really hard decision, but it's one where there's probably a lot of options that are going to go well, so there's no right and wrong here. And hopefully communicating with your kid is kind of the key to figuring out, you know what the next step is for them.

Cindy Lopez:

Yeah, great, thank you Katie.

Katherine Reeves:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Cindy Lopez:

To all of our listeners, thank you for joining us today and we hope that you will join us again next week.