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# Top 5 Strategies to Foster Mental Health in Your Child

## **Cindy Lopez:**

What can you, as a parent do to support your child's mental health? Today, you'll hear some simple strategies that you can incorporate into your family life to encourage mental wellness in your child. I'm Cindy Lopez, and I'm happy to welcome you to our Voices of Compassion podcast series, where we hope you will find a little courage, some connection and a whole lot of compassion. I'm excited to introduce our guest today, Tony Cepeda who is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Clinical Program Manager here at CHC. Tony has over 30 years of professional experience working with children, youth and their families. He's been trained in several evidence-based practices, including trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy, brief strategic family therapy, adolescent community reinforcement approach and motivational interviewing. I think you'll appreciate Tony's experience and advice as we discuss fostering mental health and wellness in your kids. Thank you for joining us today, Tony. So Tony, in our world today, we're experiencing pandemic, social unrest, distance learning, social isolation, there's so much going on. How do you see this impacting kids' mental health?

## **Tony Cepeda:**

Yes, so Cindy first off thank you for having me, I really appreciate it. I think that we are really seeing a lot of stress and anxiety placed on our families, and it's really extreme. We are entering unprecedented times and there's a lot of different factors that are affecting families. I do have some data to share with a caveat that the data is a bit sketchy at this point. We don't have a full picture, but we are seeing some trends in terms of mental health. First off, what we're seeing is about 75% of 18 to 24 year olds experiencing some type of mental health stress. And we're also seeing about 24% of 18 to 24 year olds considering suicide, which is really kind of scary for our profession, for mental health providers. We are also seeing about 7 out of 10 teens having experiences of some kind of mental health struggle, which is about three times an increase from the previous year. So we're seeing an increase in anxiety, depression and loneliness. So it's important for parents to pay attention to their children, to their teens and pay attention to their wellbeing and mental health.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Wow, thanks Tony. So, how can we encourage parents right now? How can parents really foster mental wellness in their kids?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah that's a good question, it really seems daunting. There's a tremendous amount of pressure on parents to manage their households and help manage their children and teens. So, I think it's important to keep it as simple as possible with respect to what parents are already dealing with and managing on their own. First off, I want to say that parents, you know your children really well, you are your child's best ally in addressing and maintaining mental health. So I suggest really to listen and pay attention to any changes happening with your kids. I think it's also important just in general to maintain healthy practices and routines that include healthy habits for eating, sleeping and exercise.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Wow, so it sounds like there are some things that parents can do and some of those healthy habits which are too good for all of us: good nutrition, sleeping well, eating well. So Tony, when you think about additional strategies or tools that parents can use with their kids regarding mental health and wellness, what are your go-to strategies?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah, so I have a couple of suggestions and again, I want to keep it as simple as possible for parents. I know parents are dealing with a lot on their own already. So I want to give suggestions that parents may already be using and just reinforce what they're doing or adding a few things that are easy to do. So the first thing I suggest is to be able to spend time with your child or teen and have open, supportive conversations to share and exchange ideas, thoughts, and feelings and to create a space for safe and supportive conversations. Another suggestion is to foster connections with friends; friends are an important factor in a child's wellbeing and self-esteem. And the last suggestion that I have is to encourage your child or teen, to have fun and engage in creative activities. So encouraging them to play, using art, playing music or dancing. So using creativity, as a way to improve mood and it's great as a coping strategy as well.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Wow, those are great, especially even thinking about how can I apply some of these myself. So let's go back to where you started, you talked about parents carving out time with their kids. So what does that look like? How do you create that safe space for your child to talk to you?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah, again, I want to just reiterate that I have respect for parents' time, that parents have to manage a lot, not only for themselves, but for their households and for their children as well. So I can respect that parents may not have a whole lot of time to give to their children. To me, looking at what parents have to do, time is really precious. So a couple suggestions that I have are really short and parents might already be doing some of these strategies already. So these are things that I think you can fold into your daily routine. And really the important factor here is to spend some time with your children. So here are the suggestions for carving out time. One, you can have your child help prepare dinner, and during that time you can have a conversation and ask questions. Another suggestion, take a walk together, walk down the block and back five, ten minutes, that's all it takes. Another thing you can do, spend five minutes of your daily routine in the morning, or at bedtime where you can talk, share thoughts and feelings, and you can encourage your child to share their thoughts and ideas and be open to their questions. Five minutes, that's all it takes. You can also encourage your child to engage with you with your coping strategies. Some parents like to meditate, some parents like to do yoga or exercise. You can invite your child or teen to engage with you. And it's an opportune time to build on those coping strategies and to have a conversation with your child.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Those are lots of great ideas for about, like, how you could do it. Do you have a thought about like a conversation starter to actually start that conversation with their child?

**Tony Cepeda:**

A good one to start off with is how's your day, or if it's in the morning, what are your thoughts of what's going to happen today? And it gives you an opportunity to check in with any kind of worries or stress they might be, feeling for that day. We're dealing with COVID, we're dealing with distance learning, we're dealing with social justice issues, we're dealing with economic pressures, I think it's okay for kids to ask questions. Of course you have to modify your answers based on their developmental levels. For example, I don't think it's appropriate for a five-year-old to know everything that's happening with COVID, I think they just need to feel safe. I think another question or thought you can share with the child is what is something that you are looking forward to for the day, that way they have a goal in mind and it's something that's positive that they're looking forward to.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Great, thank you for those tips, Tony. I know it's kind of hard for parents to get those conversations going with their kids, because then they say, well, how's your day, they

say fine. It's really nice to have some kind of go-to questions that really promote those kinds of helpful conversations with their kids. So we know that our kids, children, teens, young adults, adults, everyone, we're experiencing so much social isolation right now. And you talked about staying connected. So can you talk about what that looks like and maybe provide some examples?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Sure. Well, first off I want to share that most of our kids are unable to physically go to school. And that most of our kids are doing distance learning. Some kids are trickling back into the school environment, but still most of our kids are isolated at home and doing distance learning. And school is the ideal place for our children and teens to maintain and to develop social connections and to have friendships. So that's a big chunk of their lives right now that isn't available to them. So their connections with their friends is limited. And, to me, it's really important to maintain those connections and maintain those friendships because it improves mood, it helps to foster healthy coping, and it helps with self-esteem. And another point is that the connections also limit isolation and loneliness, which I think are keys to mental health issues is a sense of isolation, so connections with friends combats that. Some ideas for that, so this is somewhat of a controversial suggestion, but I believe that use of social media and video gaming is an important factor for maintaining social connections for children and teens. So kids these days, they're on Snapchat, Instagram, they do texting. They talk with their friends while they're playing video games. So these are tools that kids are already using. I think for parents, it's important to allow your kids to engage in social media, in video gaming within limits. I don't believe in playing for hours and hours or texting for hours and hours, but a limited amount of time each day to engage in social media or video gaming, I think is appropriate. Some other ideas that I have for maintaining social connections, we have to be safe, we have to ensure that our kids are not putting themselves at risk. So I think it's important to maintain social distancing and to wear masks. If kids do that, they can meet friends at the park. And we are blessed here in California, where the weather isn't extreme, that most days we can go outside, we can go to the park. It might be a little bit chilly, but we can still go outside without worrying about getting too cold. So the park is a great place to connect with friends, maintaining social distance. I think having a bike ride with a friend is a good idea as well, using the outside sidewalk to do sidewalk chalk or to play games like charades again, maintaining social distance. Again, the whole point is to find ways to maintain the social connection, given that we have restrictions nowadays.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Those are great tips Tony, just thinking about what you said about kids meeting at the park or taking a bike ride, and your caution is important. Just you know, make sure your

kids are wearing masks, make sure they're practicing social distancing. And for young kids, you probably want to practice that with them a little bit so that they can see what that looks like?

**Tony Cepeda:**

I agree with you. I think for younger kids, parents need to be involved in their social engagement you know, just to make sure that they're staying safe and that parents can give them input on what is safe in terms of their engagement.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah and the screen time thing too. I know you said that's controversial. But I mean, it's just reality. It's our lives today. Like we can't function without spending time on our screens every day. And so for parents too, I don't think you should feel guilty about that. You need screens right now and your kids need screens right now between distance learning and then the recreational kinds of things. So, I think and you've mentioned this too, but you know, you always want to know as a parent what your child is doing online. But it's a tricky time to try and really cut down screen time.

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah, you know just to reiterate I think it's important to have limits and restrictions on the use of electronics. I work with families that give their kids 30 minutes a day for social media, 30 minutes a day to play video games and you know just have a limit.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah, that's a good reminder, thank you. So, you mentioned also having fun and using creativity, it stuck out to me when you said it. So because for me, I love to paint and do art and you know, cause it uses a different part of my brain. So what would that look like? How can parents help their kids use that as a strategy?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah and Cindy, thank you for asking me about this particular strategy. It is my favorite strategy to suggest to families. So to me I think it's really important that kids and teens and their parents as well have fun. How can you argue against having fun? Fun is a healthy activity to engage in. I like to incorporate fun activities as interventions for coping. So let me give you some ideas on how to do this. So first off having fun and playing and using creativity are great tools for coping and they help to limit stress. So I suggest, encourage your child to play and use their creativity. I think you have to pay attention to what developmental age they are at. These are just some examples of encouraging your child to play. One is for a 10 year old to play with legos, having a five-year-old play with dolls, having a twelve-year-old engage in dance. So these are a

couple of different ideas for having fun and using creativity. If possible, I would encourage parents to play with your child as well and engage in that together. So some ideas for that: color together, play a card game or board game with each other, play outside, play basketball, badminton, play tennis with each other, dance together. You know, just spend more time having fun. The other thing that I think I had mentioned, this earlier finding, creative activities can be used as really powerful coping strategies. And Cindy I appreciate that you mentioned how you like to do art. I think that would be a great activity to engage with your child. And you're having fun together and you're coping together and you're limiting your stress together. So I think that there is something to be said about being creative. And I think you're right Cindy, it activates a different part of your brain and what it does is it also encourages happiness which of course will combat stress.

**Cindy Lopez:**

I know I love personally, as I already said, just to have time to get in my art room, that's unlike anything else that I do so I really appreciate that. Um Tony, as we wrap up, thinking about our listeners and you've had so many great things and strategies to share with them today, what would you say to our listeners? What do you want them to make sure that they take away from today's episode?

**Tony Cepeda:**

Yeah great question, thank you. You know I think the number one takeaway for me is to let parents know that your relationship with your child, with your teen, with your youth is the key. You are the most important person for your child and if you can foster your relationship with them, I think that is vitally important. As a parent you're your child's biggest advocate, their best ally and their closest support. So I suggest that you give your child and teen the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with you. And the last thing I want to say is enjoy your child. Enjoy the time that you can spend with them even if it's one or two minutes per day, enjoy that time with them. They will pick up on that, they will feel it and it will help them to foster their wellbeing and self-esteem.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Thank you so much for sharing your experience and your insights with us and all our listeners, thank you for investing your time with us today, and please make sure to tune in again next week. And remember you are not alone and to practice a little compassion every day, even for yourself.