

Stepping back and slowing down: How families can reduce stress, together

Tim Stauffer of the *Iola Register* sat down with Dr. Doug Wright, Clinical Director with SEK Mental Health Center, to talk about how stress affects families and how best to manage it. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

What's stressing kids out these days?



I think it's all of the normal things that we think of back when we were kids, but I think expectations on kids are so much greater than they ever were.

Expectations from their school, in many ways, are much greater than before. It was rare when I was a kid for there to be so much push to be in advanced classes, in college classes, etc. Plus, there are more demands for a kid's time.



Today, teachers and coaches expect kids to have phones. There's this constant being plugged in to school. Now it's not uncommon to get a text or reminder from school or their peers. It adds another layer of stress and pressure to kids. They also don't get to unplug from each other. If you're a kid struggling emotionally, it can be too much.

There's a great upside to it, but it also reduces that check-out time, and I think we all need downtime. I see kids having less of it these days.

What do you think stresses parents out?

I think there are also greater expectations for parents from schools: responding to emails, reminders from teachers, messages from coaches. I think all parents want the best for the kids, so it's like this ever-rising competition of making sure kids are in college classes or AP classes. I think there's also more financial pressure because college has become more expensive.

How can parents help their kids navigate stress?

I think it starts with building a relationship early on, and I think that is something that's much harder for parents. Because kids are so plugged in with their friends through

video games, phones and social media, they tend to isolate more from the family. Making sure you have quality down time, when you build that relationship, that gives you the foundation. Then when they're struggling, they're more likely to talk to you and be more invested in what you have to say.

Parents also need to be careful they're not accidentally sending the wrong message. What I mean by that is sending the message of: "If you don't succeed, then I'm going to see you as a failure."

Is social media the culprit here? Is a lot of this about taming phone and screen use?

No phones at the dinner table is a great idea. I think no phones after a certain time at night is also a good idea. Studies show that phones and their blue light really disrupt sleep. I think it's important to program in time when kids aren't using their screens.

But I also think parents have to engage and participate. I think it helps for parents to be able to use Snapchat and monitor some of that, even if they aren't using the apps actively. It's important to understand what your kids are experiencing so that you can easily talk about it when things come up in the world they live in.

How do you know a child is experiencing something more than just stress? How do you know when it's something deeper?

I think a lot of times things start with stress and kids don't seem able to cope. As a parent, if you see something that makes you think, "This isn't how my kid normally acts," and it's been going on for more than a week or two, then it's time to really tune in. When you see something that isn't their norm, maybe something deeper is going on.



I hate to say this, but kids are pretty good at hiding things from their parents!

Yes, friends are usually the first to know. Some teachers are also really tuned in. And unfortunately, I do think parents are often the last to know. But then it all goes back to building that relationship.



What are some of the challenges families here face that are unique to southeast Kansas?

Several of the counties in southeast Kansas have been identified as having some of the highest substance abuse rates of anywhere in the country. I think that's one aspect. But also, we live in a very impoverished area, and that brings on a whole set of stressors for families.

That financial pressure is very important because it's something you can't escape. And you see it affect kids. Kids are a lot more aware of what's going on than we give them credit for. That stress trickles down even if they're too young to understand why.

To help, you try to instill hope. One of the saddest things in my work is to see kids who have no hopes and dreams because of generational poverty, kids who never expect to rise above a certain level. When you see kids start to believe they can be the first person in their family to go to college or get a better job, that they can have a better life, that they can accomplish things, you see an emotional lift as well.

If someone thinks this is a great idea for a child or teen they know and wants to contact you, how would they do that?

They could just call us at 1-866-973-2241. We serve Allen, Anderson, Bourbon, Linn, Neosho and Woodson counties. We have offices within each county and they could visit our website to find locations for each office.

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