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Parental mental health and school performance

by Allison B. Spitzer

Our children know us deeply. The younger the child, the more he or she absorbs the stress, anger, or sadness we feel. When our home life and schedules are chaotic, overcrowded, or unpredictable, how can our middle schoolers believe that the routine of homework, reasonable bedtimes and other boundaries matter? If we “need a break,” are short tempered or passive-aggressive, but say “Oh, everything’s fine” to our teenagers, why would or should they share their deepest truths with us, or ask for guidance?

To serve as our child’s unconditional advocate, to provide a home that is a soothing, safe zone and retreat, and to encourage kids to do and be the best they can this year in school, there are many surprisingly simple and doable strategies.

Put on your own oxygen mask, as an individual, and as a couple if you are in a relationship. Clear out your own lingering issues — if not for yourself then for your children’s well-being. It’s tough for your child to focus on school challenges when his or her fundamental concern is really you. If you need help, face it and deal with it.

Next, be proactive and specific in talking with your kids and establishing a balanced, reliable and breathable home life. Before school starts, ask them directly whether they have concerns,

what they look forward to — and what they need from you. Respond by letting them know what your hopes are for them, and your plans (expectations) to help things go smoothly.

Family meetings (I'm a huge fan!) should go beyond scheduling logistics. Everyone has the chance to air grievances, boast, make requests, and get equal air time, at least once a week, reliably. Mom or Dad runs the meeting; families are not democracies.

The world is a hot fudge sundae — delicious and brimming with goodness. Too much, though, and families grow ill. The pressure on performance, whether academic, musical, athletic or social, has simply made our families miserable, exhausted and hopeless.

Instead, focus on each person's ability to do their best and be happy within the framework of a larger organism — the family unit. There are only so many hours to work, drive carpool and help with homework and only so much disposable income for leotards or cleats. The greater good of cooperation and mutual benefit for families, even when everyone gives up a bit, in the long term, is smarter.

Scheduled downtime, each week, adult private time (date nights), unstructured quality time with your kids develops bonds far more potent than cheering when a goal's made, preceded by the yelling to finish homework, get in the uniform, get in the car, and bringing along a sibling who resents it. Passions matter. In all families, large and small, there has to be a realistic appraisal of the time and resources that can be given to each family member, including the adults.

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