

No Shortage of Questions: FAQs from BC Parents & Caregivers

Tue, 6/28 1:16AM 26:34

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

child, parents, kids, caregiver, miller, question, teen, important, bc children's hospital, loss, families, feel, emotions, podcast, life, listeners, centre, grief, moments, swearing

SPEAKERS

Dr. Amrit Dhariwal, Bryn Askwith, Dr. Ashley Miller, Michelle Horn

- D** Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 00:04
As parents, we always feel like we have to be everything for our children. It's our job to be the solution to everything. And I think that what they need the most is just someone to be with them as they figure life out. You don't need to be there all the time. But to be there as much as you are able or when you are able just to be with them, and not to have to be everything to them.
- B** Bryn Askwith 00:31
This is Where You Are a podcast that helps families promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith.
- M** Michelle Horn 00:45
And I'm Michelle Horn.
- B** Bryn Askwith 00:46
Last season for our final episode, we brought questions from BC parents and caregivers to two experts in child and youth mental health at BC Children's Hospital and to wrap up this season, we wanted to do something similar. After all, parents have no shortage of questions when it comes to their child's mental health and wellness.
- M** Michelle Horn 01:06
Today on Where You Are, we share a range of frequently asked questions from parents and

caregivers that we often hear at the Kelty Centre, including questions on common parenting struggles, like how can I connect with my teen when they won't even talk to me? And how can I support my child through tough situations like the loss of a loved one? And we're really grateful to again have two leading child and youth mental health professionals to dig into these questions with us: Dr. Ashley Miller and Dr. Amrit Dhariwal.

B Bryn Askwith 01:33

Let's listen to that conversation. I'd like to welcome back behind the mic one of our returning guests to the podcast, Dr. Ashley Miller. Dr. Miller is a child psychiatrist and family therapist at BC Children's Hospital. She's a passionate advocate for family and caregiver involvement in mental health treatment of children and youth and the co author of the book, *What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work: A Practical Guide for Parents and Caregivers*. So great to have you back on *Where You Are*.

D Dr. Ashley Miller 02:02

So nice to be here.

M Michelle Horn 02:06

Also joining us today is Dr. Amrit Dhariwal, a clinician researcher at BC Children's Hospital, where she focuses her time on developing, providing and evaluating psychological treatments. Her current interests address somatization in children and youth, while her previous work has focused on healthy teen relationships. Great to finally have you joining us on the podcast, Dr. Dhariwal.

D Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 02:28

Thanks for having me.

M Michelle Horn 02:30

So Dr. Dhariwal, we're gonna start off with a question for you. And this is a common question that we often get at the Kelty Centre. Parents often ask us about how they can really connect with their teen, it seems like sometimes the more they ask questions, the more their teen can just kind of clam up and not want to talk. So how can parents connect with and support their teens, when teens sometimes won't even talk to them?

D Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 02:53

Oh, this is so tough. The teen years are such a hard time for well, for both teens, but also for parents. It can start to feel like your kids are drifting away, and if you're anything like me, it can send you into a bit of a tailspin. I'm kind of the person that wants to know what's in my child's

mind at all times. It can kind of feel like okay, like once you were part of me, and now you're like so separate from me. And you would think that these are actually two totally opposite things. But what's totally paradoxical and totally amazing is that research is showing us time and time again, that the more teens feel you can support their independence, the closer they actually feel to you. So when you sense or like when they sense that they are safe with you, and that they are close with you, and that you are their safe haven, they actually feel secure moving away from you. So sometimes, you know, when they're not talking with you, it's not always a bad thing. They might feel safe and secure moving away from you to explore their world independently, knowing you'll be there for them if you need them. So coming back to the issue of when your kid clams up, I mean, what a beautiful example of this kind of this paradox of like when your teen this paradox, your teen is confronting all the time at this kind of developmental stage of life. This idea that I'm having a hard time, but I want to see if I can take care of things by myself or I don't want to need you on this one. So one of the most important things that I think a parent can do here is just kind of stand back and see the big picture and recognize like, what is my child trying to accomplish and just try to salute those efforts. So I might say something like, 'Okay, I can tell something's up for you and this might have been the situation where I would start to ask questions and offer to help. But right now I see that you need to do something different and I'm around if you need me' so that the child doesn't feel abandoned and that you're gone now, and that you gave up on them, but that they also they see that you're respecting their need for space.

M

Michelle Horn 05:06

And Dr. Miller, not sure if there's anything you wanted to add to that. I know you support families in these situations as well, a lot of the time.

D

Dr. Ashley Miller 05:13

Yeah, and I have my own teenagers too, at this point. So I really relate to this question. And I think doing things together is often the way in the door. And it may feel like, oh, I don't want to have to bribe my kid with a trip to get coffee just so we can hang out. But they are motivated to be with their peers, and it's totally fine to engage in a favorite activity of theirs, whether it is a trip to the mall, or playing basketball or playing video games. And that's, that's really an underutilized one, we often get so frustrated with screens that we just want to throw them out the window. But actually, if your child is playing video games, or watching videos online, that can be a nice way to enter into their world and connect even when they're a little older.

B

Bryn Askwith 06:07

That's such a great reminder Dr. Miller of the positive uses of screens, right like they can, they can really create moments of connection between families too. I know in our family, we sometimes will do Super Mario Brothers together. You know, it's kind of fun. Dr. Miller children and youth can sometimes say some pretty surprising things that we as parents and caregivers may not be ready for, for example, 'I hate my life', or 'I have no friends' or 'Nobody likes me'. What should you say when you hear this from your child? Is it normal? At what point should you be concerned? It would be great to get your thoughts.

D

Dr. Ashley Miller 06:42

Yeah, it's a great question. And, again, you want to normalize the fact that we all have bad days, and we all have negative feelings. I mean, think about how many times you come home from work or a busy day and think, 'Oh, I just want to quit' or 'That was awful'. And we might express that to a good friend or a partner. And for our kids were the ones that they have to turn to when they're not happy with things. So for the most part, ideally want to just listen and hear them empathize with their feelings, can say something validating about it, like 'Oh, man, that sounds like it was a really, really hard day' or 'I don't blame you for feeling like you hate your life right now'. What happens when we're parents, those we often feel responsible for their unhappiness, or like somehow we should be able to change their unhappiness, or maybe that they're being ungrateful for this amazing life we've provided them. And so when they say 'I hate my life', it can feel like a personal stab. Or it can worry us that something is terribly wrong. And then rather than listen to them, as we might want our best friend to listen to us, we try to cheer them up or tell them it's not that bad, or convince them of another way to think or feel. But then they ended up feeling a little bit turned away by what we've said. And there is a line, of course, where if a child is consistently negative, or repeatedly saying that or they say it with the level of emotion, where we really read that they are serious, and they are not happy. Of course, we do need to take it seriously, but even that conversation can still start with open listening before moving into problem solving. And we're more likely to hear the important details about it, I think if we approach it from that open place, and if we're human, you know, like most of us really will respond first, potentially, by not listening, by trying to cheer them up, by because that's just human nature. But we can always go back to it and say, 'You know, when you told me before, that you hated your life, or nobody likes you and I just said, Oh, I'm sure it's not that bad. What I really should have said was, I'm sorry, you're feeling that way and can you tell me more about it?' And I think there's always a second chance.

M

Michelle Horn 09:13

Yeah, and I find you're right that it's a natural instinct to want to cheer up your kid or try to make them feel better. I try to take a breath before I respond to give me a moment to be like, how do I really need to respond in this moment, so I don't automatically go into that space of wanting to cheer up or try to make them feel better.

B

Bryn Askwith 09:32

You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. You can find all the resources in today's episode on our podcast page <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast>. If you're a parent or caregiver looking for a listening ear, connect with one of our trained parent peer support workers at the Kelty Centre by email, phone or in person. Find those details at keltymentalhealth.ca/contact-us. Stick around for the next half of our show, where our guests will offer some advice on how to support your child through the loss of a loved one.

M

Michelle Horn 10:14

So another question, Dr. Dhariwal, it often comes up in conversations with parents who contact the Kelty Centre, that sometimes their kids will complain of physical symptoms, when the parent is feeling like it might actually be due to them being anxious or stressed out. So far

parent is feeling like it might actually be due to them being anxious or stressed out. So for example, their kid is complaining of a tummy ache in the morning. But you know, as a parent that, you know, there's something going on at school that they're nervous about. And those two things might be linked. But how, as a parent, can you talk to your kid about that, especially when the kid might not be seeing the link between those two things?

D

Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 10:45

So one thing that can sometimes happen, and so one piece of advice that I often have at the front of my mind, is that sometimes parents worry, my child is trying to get out of something on purpose. And so I avoid really calling kids out on something like that, because sometimes it actually doesn't work that way. And sometimes kids aren't doing it on purpose. Instead, what I think is really helpful is normalizing the mind body connection by saying something like, 'Okay, wow, you're discovering something about yourself, your tummy really hurts. And I think your tummy is telling you very, like something very important about how you are feeling. Now I remember, today is a big day, today is the day of your test.' And so really, what I'm trying to do is help the child make connections between what is happening in their body, and what is happening in their mind. For a long time in our world, we've really separated emotions from bodies. You know, when we have an illness or an injury, we go to the doctor, and we don't talk about emotions. And when we have stress or sadness in our lives, we go to a counselor or therapist, and seldom do we talk about these things. Together, we now know that emotions are biologically relevant phenomena. And they're very motivating things that tell us something very important about our needs, and what we need to do in our lives. So something's happening, and we need to do something about it, you are nervous about a test.

M

Michelle Horn 12:23

So Dr. Dhariwal, another question we often get from parents is what to do when your child seems to be negative about everything. All their suggestions are met with 'No don't want to do that, that's boring'. It can be very exhausting. Any tips for parents in these moments?

D

Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 12:41

You know, if you're trying to build like, a really joyful, happy environment, and you know, you kind of sense that your child is sort of, you know, kind of bringing things down, it can be really hard and the parent can feel like they need to sort of bring the energy back up again. Or if you know your child, it constantly says, like, 'I don't want to do that', or 'That's boring' and as a parent, you're constantly giving suggestions and they're always saying 'No', that can feel really deflating, too. There's a sign of the times that it's up to the parents to take care of this. And parents can really feel pressured to take on a lot. So they it seems like they have to do and be everything for their child. So they have to be the disciplinarian, the teacher, the chef, the chauffeur, among many other things. And here, it sounds like they have to be the entertainer too, have to be the one who helps you with boredom and figuring out what to do with your time. But the truth is, our brains are experience dependent organs, right? And children can't learn to manage boredom or distressing experiences, unless they actually set in them and experience them repeatedly. So they need practice tolerating distress and figuring out what to do with those things. Otherwise, they will only have learned that the way to escape distress is I

need to go to my mom, my mom will fix it, or I need to go to my dad and my dad will fix it, or I need someone to do this for me. I need to escape this situation. So that's one thing that stands out for me.

B

Bryn Askwith 14:25

And I can almost hear as a bit of a sigh of relief from some of our listeners like, 'Oh, thank goodness, one less hat that I actually have to wear'. We do a lot already. We do a lot of wonderful things already for our kids. And our kids sometimes have a lot of talents and strengths and we just don't always realize like, oh, you know what, that's okay. They can just complain and let it be and, and they'll figure something out. Dr. Miller, another question that we get, what about when your child talks to you in a way that really presses your buttons? So maybe it's you know, they've said something completely inappropriate or disrespectful, like they swear at you or something like that. It can be really hard in the moment to know how to respond. You know, as a parent, do you focus on the, you know, disrespectful language? Do you acknowledge their feelings and validate what they're going through? Do you set a consequence for being disrespectful? What do you recommend to parents in these moments?

D

Dr. Ashley Miller 15:22

I think it really depends on the specific parent and the specific child in each situation. And what's right for one parent may not be right for another and same for one child and another. And what I mean by that is, if you have a child who, let's say is struggling with physical aggression, and you've decided that that's what you're working on, that's the main no go, but that you're actually going to tolerate swearing, or you're going to tolerate disrespectful behavior, because it's just not in that top category. And it also depends on the parent, everyone has their own limits. And it's important to know yours, so for example, for myself, I don't tolerate swearing. But for another parent, it may not be a big deal. So there's not one blanket answer, I think it's important as a parent to know what is okay for you and what's not. And you'll know that by tuning into yourself, how you feel, then once you've thought about that a bit, what do you want to focus on for your child, what's important to you? Well, it's good to communicate that ahead of time, of course, you know what the expectations and rules are, but we don't always do that. And when it happens, there are different ways to deal with it. So I think when things cross your real line, it's important to say so, to say 'That's not okay for me', or to say 'We need to take a break to cool down. I won't talk about this, until things are calmer. You know, I love you, but I'm gonna go to my room, and you can go to yours. But we'll deal with this later.' So I think you need to de-escalate by separating sometimes, if you have an older kid or teen. You can if it's a more minor type of thing, and your limit hasn't really been crossed, and it's more a child expressing a negative emotion, but just the negative emotion of anger, then, of course, you can validate it like, 'Man, you're so angry, and I don't blame you, I'd be really mad if that happened too' but there's a difference between a kid just swearing, you know, like punctuation mark, versus swearing at you. So I really believe it's important to set boundaries and what's okay, what's not okay, not to be a punching bag as a parent, to treat yourself with respect to expect respect from your child. But also to see that some behaviors, for example, eye rolling, or a little bit of snarkiness, or something like that, it may just be letting off steam, because the child doesn't have the power they want in that situation. And you can either ignore it, or you might even validate their anger.

B**Bryn Askwith 17:55**

I am wondering too, you know, when it when it is time for that conversation, you know, when everyone's kind of cooled down, and you want to have a conversation around, you know, kind of setting healthy boundaries, or you know, kind of limits. Can you give some examples of what that could look like for parents and for our listeners?

D**Dr. Ashley Miller 18:10**

Yes. So you could when, when everyone's calm, you can come back to and say, 'Hey, you know, yesterday when you slammed the door really loudly, like, I know you're mad, and you have every right to be mad. But it's actually not okay in this house to slam the door like that. What are some other alternatives?' and I'm using purposely using a very mild example, I think most of us would probably not even flinch at a slammed door, right? But it could this could go all the way up to punching a hole in the drywall, we need to talk about what led up to that and be curious and open. Because it's not always a one sided thing. We may have a very disregulated child, a child who has multiple mental health or substance use or other behavioral neurodevelopmental conditions. But there, it's still usually an interaction that leads or maybe not leads to the outburst, but fuels the fire. So I think as parents and caregivers, we can sort of be humble that we may have a role. But we also don't want to go too far into just taking all the responsibility blaming ourselves, thinking, oh, if only I didn't do this, I wouldn't have triggered my child. Because they need to take some responsibility too. Even little kids need to start taking some responsibility for their actions, especially if they're violating social norms or hurting others. So it's this real combination of everyone makes mistakes. We can all come back from it. Nobody is a bad person here. There's just moments that we lose it and how can we move forward and work together so that this goes better next time?

M**Michelle Horn 19:58**

So now that we've tackled some common parenting struggles and things that can kind of happen on a day to day basis, we're just going to shift the conversation a bit and talk about how parents can address some more really, you know, really serious or really difficult situations that can come up in families. So Dr. Miller, there will be times in every child's life where they will experience the loss of a loved one or a pet or something that's important to them. How can a parent or caregiver support their child through these situations of grief and loss?

D**Dr. Ashley Miller 20:31**

This is so important. And really, the key I would say here is that grief is a family affair. It's something that is best done together. It's very hard for a child or even a teen to go through grief by themselves, and we'll sometimes see kids who are brought for therapy for depression, or grief or loss. But the parent or caregiver hasn't done their, their joint grieving with the child. And that's partly why the child's feeling isolated. And it's so, so difficult. And, you know, it's asking a lot of a grieving caregiver, to look at their feelings amidst all the practical details, especially if they've lost someone very close to them. But it is so helpful and necessary for the child. So some of the practical things are just again, really listening, making space, slowing down, sometimes accepting that regular day to day commitments may not be completed at the

same level. Although it's good to keep routine, you can't necessarily do the same hectic pace at that time to honor it through rituals that are part of your community, your spiritual community, to be honest and open with kids. Because again, the secrecy around loss is sometimes what fuels the anxiety or problematic bereavement for children. And let them participate in the rituals as much as is appropriate. Memories, keepsakes, narratives, talking about the person's stories, sharing the good moments or the pet, you know, whoever, whoever it is, pet losses are very difficult too. And in remembering that it isn't just processed at one point in time. So kids as they reach different developmental levels may reprocess grief and loss or trauma, and they need to go through it again. And I think that's why so many wisdom traditions have anniversary rituals, because that's a natural part. And so sometimes we'll see a youth who seems to be suddenly very out of sorts, in whatever way it might be behavioral mental health substance, and it's really an anniversary reaction. So just to be attuned to that, to be prepared for it, if you can be as a caregiver, that that would be likely to happen and seeking connection so often as families do, we need connection outside ourselves with others who are also mourning, and in that sense of community can really support all of us and help kids get through it.

M

Michelle Horn 23:15

Thank you so much, Dr. Miller, and Dr. Dhariwal, for answering all these questions today. We get them so often through the Kelty Centre, and I think you've provided a lot of wisdom and strategies and advice for the parents that are listening today. Were there any final words of wisdom that you wanted to share with our listeners that you wanted to kind of leave them with at the end of the podcast?

D

Dr. Ashley Miller 23:35

One question that I think comes up a lot is there's so much parenting advice out there. What really matters? And I think there's a book by Dan Siegel, called *The Power of Showing Up*. And I think that title sort of says it all that it doesn't have to be fancy. It's just your time and effort. Not even all your time just as much as you can. Being there, trying your best is what matters the most, and really taking care of yourself as best you can through it as a parent or caregiver.

M

Michelle Horn 24:13

Thank you. And Dr. Dhariwal?

D

Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 24:15

Yeah, I would just like to echo what Dr. Miller said, I think that's a beautiful, saying, you know, the power of showing up. I think like the one saying that always sticks with me is as parents, we always feel like we have to be everything for our children. It's our job to make them happy to fix their problems to solve everything going on to be the to be the solution to everything. And I think that what they need the most is just someone to be with them as they figure life out. So and like Dr. Miller said, you don't need to be there all the time. But to be there as much as you are able or when you are able just to be with them and not to have to be everything to them.

B

Bryn Askwith 25:07

Thank you both so much Dr. Miller and Dr. Dhariwal, these takeaways and words of wisdom for our listeners are absolutely phenomenal. Thank you both.

D

Dr. Ashley Miller 25:16

Thank you so much.

D

Dr. Amrit Dhariwal 25:18

Thank you.

B

Bryn Askwith 25:28

A big thanks to Michelle for co-hosting this episode. And thank you as always to our listeners, Michelle wild to think that we just wrapped our final episode for season three.

M

Michelle Horn 25:38

I know it was such a great season. We had so many different topics that we got to cover in this season and I'm really looking forward to starting the planning for next season four.

B

Bryn Askwith 25:50

Me too. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz with audio engineering by Sam Seguin, audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating on Apple podcasts or wherever you might be listening now.

M

Michelle Horn 26:13

Are you looking for more great episodes of where you are? Find us wherever you listen to podcasts, and of course at keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast. We hope you'll make us a go to resource to promote your family's mental health and wellness from where you are to where you want to be.