

Being at Your Best as a Parent. Taking Care of Your Health and Wellbeing Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello. I am Annmarie McMahon with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University and this is the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

As parents, we want to be at our best for our children. I've learned that if I want to be at my best, I need to take care of my own health and wellbeing, and that includes my social and emotional health along with my physical health.

JENNIFER MILLER:

We need to look at ways to care for ourselves, care for our wellbeing in order to be the parents we want to be, and I think it starts with really small steps.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Many of us experience changes in our relationship with ourselves when we're in a parenting role. A child brings about positive changes in identity as we play a necessary role in their lives. But a child can bring about some strains too - less sleep, less time to connect with others, less time for nutrition, exercise and reflection. We might find ourselves feeling stressed, depleted, or even overwhelmed more often and feeling incapable of devoting energy to our own well-being when we are so focused on caring for others.

JENNIFER MILLER:

I think our kids need to understand that we are human and that we are constantly learning and developing, and that they are part of that learning and development.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'd like to introduce our guest for today's podcast. Jennifer Miller, lead author of ParentingMontana.org and also author of the book "Confident Parents, Confident Kids; Raising Emotional Intelligence In Our Kids and Ourselves from Toddlers to Teenagers." Jennifer has over 25 years of experience working with adults - whether educators or parents - helping them become more effective with the children they care for by learning to nurture their social and emotional well-being. She will be sharing some valuable insights on ways in which busy parents and caregivers can care for their own well-being in the midst of the many demands they face.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Welcome, thanks for being here.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Thanks Annmarie, I'm looking forward to our conversation today.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, to get started. Most of us know that we should eat healthy food and get exercise to feel better and contribute to our health. But what do you mean when you say contributing to a parent's social and emotional health? What is social and emotional health and what does that look like?

JENNIFER MILLER:

I'm going to start out with emotional health. I think we, uh, have to know our inner expressions, our inner states and, uh, that's no small feat in a culture that tells us what we can feel, what we can't feel, what we can show in public, what we can't show in public. So most of us are not that well in tune with what's going on with our emotions. So, it takes attention, it takes acceptance of what we're feeling, it takes some reflection to ask questions about the what and the way. What are we feeling? Often it's a constellation of a mix of emotions.

Sometimes they're conflicting, sometimes we don't have language that really works for us to pinpoint what we're feeling, which can be really frustrating. And, we see it in our children, we see it in our teens when we ask them what they're feeling and they can't really well communicate what's going on inside. So, it takes that reflection of asking both the what, what are we really feeling here? And then why. What- what triggered it? What circumstances are surrounding it? And an even deeper question is where did it come from?

So emotions are created, are learned over a lifetime, and often our emotions stem from situations that occurred when we were young. And when we have those emotions as a parent, we don't necessarily draw that history or connection to that history, but yet we feel the feelings, which can be very confusing. So, how can we reflect deeply upon where those feelings are coming from originally and, that gives a sense to us of, "Oh, now I understand why I'm so heated, why this is so upsetting to me."

If we just look at the moment in time it may not feel reasonable, but if we look back at our history, we can understand, "Okay, this emotion I felt before, and it's really strong because my boundaries have been crossed in the past." Or whatever connection to that history of emotion would be. So, getting in touch with our emotional health, setting clear emotional boundaries, and I know we'll get into this in our conversation further, Annmarie, but being clear about our emotional boundaries with our children and our family members is really critical.

And then our social health, we can kind of ask the question, "How are we feeling about our relationships?" Are they connecting? Do they feel intimate? Or do we feel like we have a lot of conflict? And conflict is normal, of course, but if we have frequent and often stress and conflict in our relationships, then we have to ask the question, are those relationships healthy, and how are we reflecting on our reactions and our communications with those individuals to make sure that we are setting healthy boundaries and asserting ourselves in ways that are constructing and not aggressive or competitive?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I just took a bunch of notes. So, there's so many questions that I have just based on what you said and the first thing that I wanna say is like so how do I do that? How do I become better at figuring out where my feelings came from, or looking at my relationships? But I know that's important, but when I look at like the million tasks that are on my to do list, I become really exhausted just keeping up with the day to day with my family needs.

It seems like everyone's going in a different direction. Sometimes I feel like I'm the core of this wheel that is turning, and so I know that I'm supposed to be doing these things, taking better care of myself, but I really struggle doing that and caring for everybody else. So, sometimes I feel guilty, or like I'm really... I'm sending a selfish message to my kids when I pull away and take time for myself. So, can you, I guess, speak to that a little bit?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah, of course. I think one easy test is to say in the heat of the moment when we're in the midst of busy life with our families, with a couple deep breaths, can we return to calm? If we can't return to calm, then our resources have been overextended. And we don't have a well of mental emotional resources to draw upon, and our fuse is gonna be short.

In other words any little crisis can set us off, we will not have the patience we need to deal with the mess that children and teens make, with the mistakes that they naturally make. And so we will be fighting more. We will be stressed more. And if we think that our children won't notice, they do notice. Emotions are contagious, and when we are stressed and anxious, they feel it, and if we're not talking about it and we're trying to bury or hide it, then they feel it, but they can't name it and they don't know why, which can be scary and confusing.

And it also models something that we don't want. As they become teenagers and they're more prone to kind of hide in their rooms and create this private independent life, we still want them to come to us and talk to us about their deepest emotions and their biggest problems. But if we are not vulnerable with them and sharing who we are, they may not feel safe to do that, and they haven't had the modeling to do that.

So, there are many, many reasons, I think, why we need to ask the question: why are we giving our whole selves away? When we give our whole selves away to our children, to our family, to our work responsibilities, we begin to feel victimized, we begin to ruminate on our own needs and almost get panicky, because our needs aren't being met. If we keep suppressing them and pushing them down, we feel more and more of a sense of isolation, of loneliness, of unworthiness and, uh, of being the victim, which means that there's also someone to blame.

And that's a really dangerous pattern to get into, because when we start blaming, we blame our most intimate others, our children, our teens, our partner, and our other intimates, our aging parents, our friends. So, it is a dangerous game to play to let go of our sense of agency, and that's really what we're allowing when we're saying, "Nothing

works without me. I can't be away for a minute." It's not sustainable for anyone and, uh, and you're allowing that lava to build in the volcano that is about to explode.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I find myself, or have found myself in that pattern of parenting to exhaustion. So many times. And then... and then recognizing that I am needing something and not, you know, I- I think that takes work to be able to identify what I'm feeling, to put a name to it, and then to figure out where that comes from. It's interesting. I mean I've definitely seen that pattern. So, it kind of comes back to this place of allowing myself to become a better parent by taking care of myself. And I've heard this phrase a lot. It seems very trendy right now of self-care. And it almost seems it- it's a bit buzz worthy. So how do I separate what that really means and what's meaningful there, from that, uh, pop culture or sort of fad language around self-care?

JENNIFER MILLER:

There is a real negative connotation with self-care. You do see it everywhere in social media, we need to invest in self-care. And I think the intent is good that we do need to invest in wellbeing, but self-care I think has the connotation of self-centeredness, or selfishness, and that's something we wanna run far away from, as loving, caring parents who are passionate about raising confident kids.

So, sometimes I think talking about self-care seems like an antithesis to who we are as parents, when we care so much about the role of parenting and we know that our influence is great in our children's lives. Yet, uh, yet it does point us to- to taking care of ourselves and- and wellbeing. And I think, uh, I think the role of parenting, if you are a loving, caring, involved parent, is all consuming by its very nature.

And so we- we need to look at ways to care for ourselves, care for our wellbeing in order to be the parents we wanna be, and I think it starts with really small steps. Because we are all so busy, we don't have time to make a spa appointment, or the financial resources to make a spa appointment. But we can do something every day to take a step back. It can be as simple as remembering with your morning coffee to take some time alone to take some deep breaths, maybe to read a piece of wisdom that will give us some fuel or inspiration or motivation for the day.

There are small little steps that we can take. And if it's daily, then we don't have to wonder, you know, maybe I need to write this is my schedule, every Friday I'm going to get to the gym. But I've got this ritual, I've got this routine, every day at four o'clock I'm gonna take a little time out, I'm gonna walk outside, I'm gonna deeply breathe the fresh air no matter what the temperature or weather, and that's gonna be part of how I take care of my social and emotional wellbeing.

So, it doesn't have to be these big swaths of time or take a lot of resources, and in fact we won't do it if it does, right? What are those little things that you could do every single day that will begin to restore your well of resources so that when problems come up, because they will, you have a little bit of patience built up and you're ready for it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that is one of the things I need to remind myself of. So for me, that's every day I take the dogs for a walk. Some days those walks are a little longer than others (laughing). But one of the things that I have gotten in the habit of doing is during those walks, whether it's toward the end or the beginning, sometimes I phone a friend because I realize that as a busy parent, it's easy to miss out on those social connections.

I've seen my group of friends lose ourselves in our parenting, especially when our kids are young, but even now as my kids are getting older, you know, the little kids takes so much intensive time, but as my daughter is getting older, her schedule and managing her schedule is getting, you know, it gets quite filling on the calendar. So, what advice can you give for balancing identity as an individual with being a good parent?

JENNIFER MILLER:

That's a big question (laughs). I think that you need more than just parenting in order to be a good parent. So, I think we all have to ask the question, what's our deeper purpose for being on this planet? What are we all about? And certainly we know, as loving, caring parents, that parenting is part of that, but, but there is... there is more to our identity than being a parent. And, if we allow ourselves to lose ourselves in that one role, we will compromise our wellbeing.

So asking the question, what do we love? What fills our cup, right? What gives us inspiration and joy? And then not feeling guilty about engaging in those things, realizing that we're modeling for our children and teens engagement in a passion, inspiration and interest that we want for them. We want that for their lives. We don't want to raise workaholics, right? We don't want to raise children who are so consumed with one role in their life that they don't have a full life and they don't have their health and wellbeing, because they become obsessive about one thing in their lives.

And that's in essence what we're modeling when we are consumed by parenting. So, I love your phone a friend example. Your walk, and then phone a friend, finding a little tiny space in our calendar to make social connections for ourselves, if that is, you know, filling for us, is really, really important. There are others who are going through the same kinds of things, and our sense of wellbeing can go up as we engage with others and they understand us, they see us, they value us in a very different way than our kids or even a partner could.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

There are times when things aren't so smooth for me, and so smooth with my parenting. So sometimes I try to hide burdens or emotional turmoil that I'm going through as an individual from my kids. When is it okay to let them know all of these other things that are going on in my life, these social and emotional things? And when is it maybe too much, like I'm putting too much on them? I like the idea that my kids see me as a human, but I know there's a balance there.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah, I love that, I think there is a balance, but I also know that the only way that we can really be intimate with people is to be vulnerable and show even our challenging feelings. So, I think it is really important to allow your children to understand what you're coping with, however the balance that you talk about, we should never ask our children to carry our burden.

In other words, uh, how can you share your feelings... I'm, you know, I'm really frustrated, I'm wrestling with an issue at work this week, so if you see me feeling more anxious, that's what it's about. I'm really... I'm struggling with a problem at work, and it involves a coworker and I'm really wrestling with it. Just so you know what's going on.

Asking them to carry it would be sitting down and really unburdening all of the details of it and asking them to kind of be a part of the drama that we are engaged in in work. So, there is this emotional boundary that you can set, and sometimes it's hard for people to be clear about where that boundary is. But I think letting your children see that you have challenging emotions is critical.

Being honest about what's going on, because they are, as I said, emotions are contagious, they're feeling it, but they can't really explain it or name it. If you don't articulate what's going on with you, they won't be able to certainly name what's going on with you. So, allowing them into your world is important, but not involving them in the drama of it, is also important.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think you pointed out something really interesting, and I wrote it down. I mean that is really this difference of being proactive versus reactive. And, you know, the benefit of hosting this podcast is I'm learning so much about myself and my own parenting. But I rarely probably say, "Hey, this is gonna be a big week for me, I've got some things going on," or, you know, "Grandpa's got a- a doctor's appointment that's really weighing heavy on my mind."

I find myself often being really reactive, and that can feel dramatic to them and that is that line. How interesting it is for me to reflect on taking that time in my day to say, yeah, I'm feeling kind of stressed, I can share that with my kids upfront, and just how much healthier that is for all of us. So, that's something that's really cool.

JENNIFER MILLER:

How much does that happen to all of us, that we're reactive, we're less patient, we're snappish, and really the snappishness may not relate to our kids at all. It may relate to what's going on in another part of our lives, but they're not aware and- and their f... but yet again, they're feeling it.

I really like Annmarie, your idea of being proactive. Just a couple weeks ago, we all, our family, had a big week ahead for very different reasons, and we sat at dinner and said, "Okay, well, this week dad is traveling. He's stressed and getting ready to travel for work and so here's what's happening for him." And we kind of went through each family member.

And what that does is builds the empathy muscle, so that during the week when, you know, when our son is seeing the stress, he makes meaning of it. He knows what's

going on, and he can at least say, "Okay, I see dad's really stressed, but I know that's because he's getting ready for a big trip." Um, so I love that idea of being a bit proactive about knowing when it's coming and talking about it so that each family member can be sensitive to one another as your life unfolds.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like the idea of just creating that as a habit, that proactive sharing of where I'm at. How do I be honest with my kids when I'm not so great at other things, at some other habits like getting enough sleep, or eating well? And share that I'm still sort of growing with them in a way that teaches them to be healthy and have healthy habits as well. Does that make sense?

JENNIFER MILLER:

It really does make sense, and I will say at different parts in our children and teens lives, they struggle more with those healthy habits like eating well and getting enough sleep at night. And certainly we as adults struggle with it as well. It can be a big source of conflict in a family. Bed time can be a big source of conflict, getting to bed on time, getting enough sleep.

And then if enough sleep doesn't happen, of course you have less emotional resources the next day, so you're not gonna be as patient, your kids aren't gonna be as patient with any challenges that come their way. So, I think our kids need to understand that we are human and that we are constantly learning and developing, and that they are part of that learning and development.

We learn from them, through their challenges, we learn every time. And so we can be accountability partners to one another. If we talk about, you know, I really am tempted to stay up late. I know it's not great for me and I know I don't feel great the next day, but I always have that temptation. What can I do strategize with your teen, for example, teens are historically known for not getting enough sleep but needing a whole lot of sleep, right?

So, it's dealing with the impulse at night to stay up late and then suffering the next day. So, how can you be accountability partners for one another and say, "Let's talk to one another at night. Let's do a wind down together. Let's have a final glass of milk before bed, or let's talk about our gratitude from the day. Let's create a ritual where we can connect so that we both get to bed and get enough rest."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like that. I know my daughter would be very eager to create a routine with me (laughs).

JENNIFER MILLER:

Nice.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that she would be really interested in that.

I've taken several notes on our chat today. I'm imagining that if I'm a parent listening to this podcast while they're going on a walk, maybe they have heard some things that they've picked up on too.

What are just a few steps that we can take right now toward taking care of social and emotional wellbeing?

JENNIFER MILLER:

I think in thinking about small steps, one piece that can go a long way toward your sense of social and emotional wellbeing as a parent is to develop a daily ritual. And whatever that daily ritual is for you, is gonna be very personal. Is it taking deep breaths in the morning on your own? Is it taking a walk with your dog? Is it reading? Is it seeking wisdom from an author that you appreciate? From a speaker that you appreciate?

Is it journaling? Journaling is a wonderful way to get in touch with what's going on inside you when you're confused, overwhelmed and not sure. So what is that small daily ritual that you can commit to, dare I say you might even look forward to, that is reasonable, that you know will happen? It can't be so big or onerous or consuming that it won't happen. What's that small daily ritual?

The other way that I think a small step that can nourish our daily sense of wellbeing is simply accepting our feelings. And I know that sounds maybe even ridiculous, but if you count in a day, if you take one day and you count how many times you tell yourself, "I'm fine," and decide to plow through, versus acknowledge, "I'm really frustrated right now. I'm feeling really angry. I'm feeling sad and disappointed." Those challenging emotions are ones that we have become really rehearsed at batting away, pushing down and suppressing.

And that wears on us every day. It wears on us. If you think about your emotional resources in a container like a cooking measuring cup and it's all full up. Every time we deny an emotion, "I'm fine, I'm fine," we deplete some of that water in our measuring cup. Some of our patience, some of our wellbeing. And so how can we pay attention to what's going on inside and name it and accept it? That alone will begin to fill our cup up as we understand what's really true for us, how we're holding on to our authentic self, how we're respecting our authentic self by saying, "This is really what I'm experiencing in life."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And all of those things-

JENNIFER MILLER:

So, those are two small step-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah, those are great steps. And those both have ripple effects down to our kids.

JENNIFER MILLER:

I think they do.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, finally, is there anything to add, um, that's critical to this conversation, that maybe I just didn't know enough to ask you?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yes. We talked earlier in the conversation about parenting resilience, what makes you strong in times of crisis, or just simply tough times day to day. We talked about one thing being asking for help, but another way that you can contribute to your daily sense of wellbeing and your resilience is by learning about your child's social and emotional development and ways in which to support it.

So, the Parenting Montana toolkit is an amazing resource for saying, "I'm having a challenge with my six year old and they're really not listening to me. I wanna build listening skills. How can I do that?" And you can go in and take a look and learn about positive ways that you can teach, practice, model listening skills. So, I think we feel empowered, we feel that sense of agency when we have a challenge and we actually know a healthy constructive process for doing something about it.

So, it really does make a difference to learn about our children's social and emotional developmental milestones, what are they working on, what are they challenged by, and how can we as a parent support it?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love that. And I think too for me it's just be easy on yourself as a parent. There's so many things to manage and navigate and, I don't know, I think I'm reminded today just to take a deep breath and know that I'm doing okay sort of managing the career and the family and all of those things. So, I think you've done a great job in giving us small steps and maybe, you know, starting with one, that simple routine, I think makes a lot of sense to me.

So, thanks so much for being here. I've appreciated all of your wisdom. I look forward to having you back on a future podcast as we continue the Parenting Montana journey.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Thank you. It sounds great.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I've heard today that taking care of our physical needs along with our social and emotional needs is part of being a good parent and offers the modeling necessary for our children to develop their own healthy habits.

Taking care of ourselves means that we devote some of our precious time and energy to our own care with the confidence that those actions contribute to the whole family because they allow you to bring your best self to them. In addition, since we are always growing our social and emotional skills as adults, parenting children offers a unique

opportunity to really hone our skills as we go about our daily routines and even face challenges.

For more information on taking care of yourself as a parent, including Intentional Ways to Grow a Healthy Relationship With Your Parenting Partner, check out the additional podcasts, tools and resources being continuously added to ParentingMontana.org. Thank you for joining us today.

33:36 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities Division and is supported in part by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

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