



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 28: Tame That Stress, Enhancing Family Coping

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith gives some tips to help families tame stress and develop healthy habits that boost well-being.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. We know that caregivers stress, anxiety, and depression can impact children. A recent study found that children whose parents had increased stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of the COVID pandemic were more likely to show signs of depression and anxiety. For families with children with special health care needs, the uncertainty of the pandemic has led caregivers to show greater levels of emotional distress and lower well-being, which greatly impact the family's stress. It can be challenging to tame that stress, but there are some stress reduction strategies that can help. There are several Well@Work podcasts that you might find helpful, find a link in the episode notes.

For Chris and Amanda, taming their stress was a key part of helping their children feel calmer and safer during the pandemic. Chris is one of those people who needs his regular schedule, so the change in routine caused him some distress. Initially, Amanda felt that the bulk of virtual school and caregiving fell on her shoulders, which caused her to feel resentful and overwhelmed. Their kids noticed their frequent disagreements and complained, and this led them to bicker even more. It was an uncomfortable house and their kids picked up on it right away. They noticed their teenagers began picking on each other and their nine-year-old became more demanding, especially for Amanda's attention. All three children began having conflicts with their peers and were sullen and irritable at dinner time, sometimes refusing to come to the table to eat. The stress was contagious and everyone in the family was suffering. If you are feeling like you can relate to Amanda and Chris's story, here are some ideas about how you can get a handle on that out of control stress and boost your family's well-being.

Tip 1: name it to tame it. Amanda and Chris noticed the changes in their family functioning and called a family meeting where everyone shared their concerns and feelings about all the arguing and tension in the house. Amanda and Chris stated that they realized their stress in arguing was negatively impacting the family and they apologized. They gave each family member an opportunity to identify what they were worried about and made sure everyone's feelings associated with all of the changes were identified. Chris explained how important family dinners were to him and requested that they make it a priority. He wanted this time to anchor their evening activities and be at a similar time every night. Amanda tamed her stress by asking Chris to take homework duty three nights a week and she also asked the older kids to start doing their own laundry. The kids talked about wanting to have more time to laugh and just have fun as a family without any conflict or

chores, so they declared Sunday to be a “no chores day,” where they would focus on just recreation and relaxation. In a few weeks, they seemed to bounce back and everyone seemed happier.

Tip 2: aim for less screen time. This is one of the biggest challenges for many of us at any age. Constant news about COVID death rates and conflicts over the right treatments has been keeping everyone off balance. For Amanda and Chris, they turned off the news in the morning and replaced evening tv and social media time with playing kickball in the backyard, family game night, and walks in the park. It was important for Amanda and Chris to model healthy behavior for the kids, they committed to these family rules and they stuck to them.

Tip 3: make family meetings part of the routine. Make time for conversations where everyone can voice their concerns and feelings. Set in place rules to help guide the time so everyone feels heard. After sharing concerns and feelings, ask if they want sympathy or a solution, and respect their request. Explain changes as they come in age-appropriate ways, ask how they feel about these changes, and offer to share your feelings about the changes, too. If the change is temporary, mark the start and end date on a calendar all can see. For Amanda and Chris, they wanted family meetings to be fun and routine, so they did this informally at the end of dinner once a week.

Tip 4: get moving. Exercise and physical activity are great ways to get out big emotions. Exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and to improve sleep. Amanda and Chris committed to meeting the guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity for kids daily. You can do this too. If you have a yard, set up a soccer net or put up a basketball hoop in the driveway; older kids can supervise the younger ones and you can join them. Consider a trip to the park, dance breaks before dinner, or walking instead of driving to do errands. If your family is cautious about contact with others indoors, time outdoors with friends can fill the social needs of kids while also helping them get that needed exercise.

So many things have changed as a result of the COVID pandemic. We will think differently about how we socialize, where we go, how we spend our time, the way we work and learn. We will have lasting memories of this time, for children these memories will inform their behavior now and through adulthood. Make sure they also build healthy habits that increase their well-being and ability to bounce back from stress. And remember to stay well at home. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast.

Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.