

Hello and welcome to another edition of Mental Health Corner. My name is Dan Holtzman. I'm the principal of Great Neck North High School. With me, as always, is my mental health team and allow them to introduce themselves.

Hi. Dr. Berzins, school psychologist.

Hi. Dr. Chang, school psychologist.

Hi, Julie Peralo, school psychology intern.

Hi, Elena Barr and school psychologist.

Hi. Elana Shoal School social worker.

So thank you everyone for joining me and having another conversation to help support parents and students in our community. I thought today we would focus our attention on effective parenting and support that we can provide to our parents, particularly when they're facing some behavioral difficulties with their child. Because oftentimes, as you know, in your experience, behaviors that are of concern generally manifest at home and or at school, and you see them in both environments. So I'm wondering just from your experiences whether it be this year, it doesn't necessarily have to be COVID related, but just in general, what are some behaviors that you tend to see in students that you've had to intervene with, and what are some parameters and strategies that you use to address them within the scope of the school?

So Dr. Berzins will start with you.

Sure. I think it falls under the umbrella of non compliance or task avoidance for parents, where the idea is they make a request of their child in terms of meeting a certain curfew or showing independence or completing tasks around the house or just doing their homework independently or communicating what their schedule may look like. And they're not or lack of communication. So it falls under those umbrellas from myself in terms of the student not communicating effectively to their parent or alerting them of certain projects or assignments or events, not doing or not complying with what the parents expectations are.

And how do you see that translating then into the school environment?

So if you're talking about failure to meet curfews or do tasks around the house and that sort of refusal, do you see a connection between that and what goes on within the scope of, let's say, everyday classrooms going to school each day?

Yeah, just fun enough, yesterday was working with a family whose student is, I don't want to say addicted to video games, but is definitely preoccupied at video games and could play three to 5 hours every day. And they went from being an AB student to maybe a CB student. So in that family's household, that's a major decline. And as a result, they're not checking when

assignments are due. They're not attending review sessions. They're not being proactive, they're not attending club meetings that they used to attend. So an overall disengaged not engaging in extracurriculars sports home communication activities. So, yeah, it definitely crosses the line between home school extracurricular activities, unfortunately.

Dr. Chang, in your experience, in the example that Dr. Berzins just illustrated, where's the connection breakdown, the parents and the student didn't wake up one day and this was the issue. This sounds like something that progresses over a period of time. So what might be signs that got missed in this particular case or in cases in general that where parents say they were this and now they're this. What, in your experience, have you seen as far as signs that get missed?

Yeah, I think setting up routines for success is so important, but it's difficult to navigate that through the developmental course of elementary school, middle school, and high school. So I think what a lot of our kids deal with is trying to become more independent while working within that network and parents trying to allow your kid to become more independent, sometimes being not involved enough, sometimes being overly involved. So finding that balance, what gets missed, I guess just the clear rules and structure is something that's really important to establish. So whether that's a big piece that gets missed or not, I would say that's always something that we'll try to take a step back when we have a situation like that. And even just from the child standpoint and from the parent standpoint, define how much is enough or what's an appropriate level of playing video games every day. So, like, the nerdy part of a school personnel wants to get data and where is it at? A kid might say 3 hours of video games is not enough. I don't want to be playing six. But a parent might not even realize that their kid is playing 3 hours of video games every night, thinking it's probably around one or two. So having that hard data is really something to is a good place to start and then build structure around negotiations between the two parties.

So this is a question for the entire group. So in a situation like this, right, where a parent comes to the realization that there's an issue, how do you help the parent? Or has the parent then rein that back in? It's like similarly to what we tell teachers in the beginning of the school year, right? Set your parameters early, be consistent in the parameters because it's more difficult as the year goes on to sort of undo behaviors that you've established, the culture you've created in your classroom. Right. So similarly to that in the house, has a parent then go from allowing this three to four or 5 hours, however many hours it is, of video gaming and curfew missing and all the things, how do we help them, what can we do to help them sort of regain that control? For lack of a better word?

I'll respond to that. I think that you have to, first off, see where your child is, right? So you have to start off where they are, get a good sense of it, and then go from there. So if really a culture has developed between you and your child where you don't have control, right, now where they kind of feel like they're running the show and they're making all the rules and they're making all of their own decisions. You can't really reel that in by putting down a million different rules and

saying, well, from now on it's my way, because it's just not going to work. Your adolescent is just too big, too mature, too independent for that at this point. But you have to start where they are and figure out what's my small goal at least and have a reasonable discussion with your child as to why as a parent you care about them, you want to move in this direction, you think this is important. If they understand the reasoning behind it, they might be more likely to start to cooperate with you a little bit and then just figure out what's a small change that I want to push for to start and pick a couple of main priorities, not a lot, have a discussion about it and put some structure around it. I think acknowledging progress, even if it is small progress that you make and going from there tends to be a lot more effective than trying for something really huge and not noticing that maybe your teenager is kind of moving in the right direction towards you in terms of what you think is best for them. Acknowledging progress is very important in terms of just maintaining that relationship and having it be kind of a collaborative thing. But in their best interest, I think acknowledging the progress made is really important and kind of having those reasonable goals. And when they do get to a point where they are reaching those goals, really upping it and acknowledging that they've done so well and that they've reached it and making sure it's really obtainable, it's also important that when they do something good or they're making progress, like I said, to acknowledge that and kind of reward it to an extent, within reason. But you don't want to just focus on when they mess up because no one's perfect and we will make mistakes and a student can make mistakes. So kind of just focusing on the good and not so much harping on those negative or fallbacks that might happen here and there and then maybe like even knowing your kid better than anyone, what approach is going to be better? Right? Typically what we're talking about is like shaping where you start small with the demand and then increase it over time. So you're going to gradually wean down from 5 hours to a lower point. That's like foot in the door as a business technique. The other version of that is door in the face where you're going to make a hard cut, try to cut cold turkey or make like a big drastic change. Some kids will respond better to the foot in the door, the slow shaping and the gradual decline. But some kids also, and depending on maturity might also acknowledge that, yes, this issue is out of hand, and I need to be cut off more strict and respond better to that door in the face kind of approach.

When does it get to a point where there's an acknowledgment or a recommendation that the problem is bigger than what the family potentially can handle? So we can stick with the video game example. And while Dr. Berzins has indicated that the student isn't necessarily addicted to it, there is such a thing, is that there is such a thing as being addicted to your cell phone into electronic devices and gaming and things of that nature. So how do parents recognize that the problem is bigger than some of these recommendations, while helpful and worthy of exploration, might not be all that's needed.

I guess it depends on if you're looking at it from, like, the behavioral angle versus the more psychological addiction angle. From the behavioral angle, I would say earlier the better. Right. So as a parent, recognizing what your competencies are and reaching out for help at an early stage, if you're getting uncomfortable with a given situation, the earlier the better. Whether that's asking a friend relative who's been through it, whether that's asking a community member, or

whether that's asking a professional calling out to someone private in the community, or reaching out to the guidance mental health team for assistance. That way you're even showing your kid you're modeling the appropriate behavior.

Right. You're recognizing that there's a need, and I could approach it one way, but I also just want to be open minded and seek out support when needed. It's a great thing to model. Probably the same for the psychological if you're treating it from, like, an addiction standpoint.

Dr. Berzins, I know you talked about some addiction research with gaming in particular. Right? Yeah. In checking out actually, like, Harvard research, they are talking about certain pitfalls that students have fallen into and certain effective parenting techniques, and they're not endorsing a cold turkey approach from their angle. It is a negotiation. It is the gradual decline of it funny enough, they're actually recommending increasing their participation in alternative or hopefully alternative activities that might bring equal joy or excitement. So it's funny enough, like, instead of saying stop gaming, it's like, hey, consider chess or sports or swimming or actually they actually want you to do, like adrenaline, adrenaline increasing activities like try rock climbing. Try do maybe unorthodox activities that are novel to reach that same level of, I guess, dopamine dopamine. Okay. And so funny, if that's their angle, it's not focus on removing the gaming. It's increasing alternative, hopefully equally enjoyable novel activities.

I think it's tough, too, because with our world being so digitally linked all the time, with so many things being half in the real world and half online. And you can look this up. You can link to this website. You can upload your assignment. Everything is online. Similar to eating. When people have an issue with eating too much, when people have an issue with using technology too much, it's very hard to just go cold turkey with those things. You don't stop eating. You have to kind of look at how you're eating, how much you're eating, when you're eating, when you're eating unhealthily, right? Same with technology. You have to kind of look at where it crosses that boundary of healthy and just recreational enjoyable versus erasing my other priorities, right? So if I'm gaming for 6 hours a day and I'm actually dropping out of school because of it or close to it, then that is clearly a point where you've crossed a line where you've kind of lost sight of the priority that most young people have at this age. So that is something to be mindful of and look at and it's a more difficult addiction to address in some ways than some other types of behavior that crosses that line.

So interesting is that in dealing with psychology and dealing with mental health, the use of the word relationship has been brought in to be attributed to the thing that the person is connected to, whether even in an unhealthy sort of way, right? So the example that you used was about food, right? So when you are in that predicament, you need to then sort of recalibrate and re establish a relationship with food and eating, right? So it's sort of this reestablishing the relationship in your life, your connection to this thing that you've now pushed a little too far or maybe a lot too far in the wrong direction. And you kind of have to reel it back in to find, as you indicated, a lot of balance in your life because it can't be substituting. Now for things that are of health, of health to you, it can't be impacting you health in an emotionally or mental or even

physical way negatively as opposed to be sort of this add on piece in your life that drives pleasure and is a little escape for you from the stressors of your day and such. But now that's just sort of become the only focus in your life. But going back to sort of the addressing of it, it sounds to me like this isn't just okay, here's what we're going to do, we're going to establish these limitations, these are now the new rules and so on and so forth. It sounds to me, and correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds like this is a tremendous commitment on the part of the parent and the student to make this work.

This can't be one of those when we grew up, parents would say I'm not going to tell you again, this is what not you know, I can do this anymore, this goes far deeper than that. So how do we help parents understand the level of commitment that an issue like this takes to essentially as I used the term before reestablish control over this particular situation. Sometimes it will come from a conversation with the parent earlier on to identify the problem and identify a potential plan for the problem, like restructuring a behavioral shaping plan and relooking at re examining their schedule, a student's schedule after school and what it would look like and having them think about that. Or do a dry run for a week and see what kind of issues would you run into? What kind of pitfalls would you run into? So that way, before it's implemented, before the rules are actually set into stone, so to speak, you can kind of coach the parent through that. Like, here is where it was easy. It was easy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. But then Thursday, when so and so had this activity, so and so comes late every Thursday. Because of this, you wouldn't be able to follow through on the plan or monitor so and so effectively. So we would have to alter that Thursday plan differently. So kind of proactively predicting any difficulties in the plan, because whatever plan that you're especially behavioral plans that you come up with, they have to be implemented with fidelity, with truthfulness and effectiveness. And if it's Praise the Day of, praise the Day of, or like a token reward for completing homework on time, you have to be able to deliver that. And if you're going to change the history, yeah, consistent, effective manner.

So these plans and Dr. Berzins, you used the word before, but does the team agree that these plans, assuming that that's what's agreed to parents recognizes what I need to do? Is the plan a joint effort? Is a negotiation? Is it really a negotiation between the parents and the student about what the next steps are going to be in addressing this particular issue?

Yeah. I would say to step back to answer the previous question. I don't want to overuse it, but the idea of telling parents it's a process, or you could say it's a learning process, or the idea is any skill that the parent has learned, whether it's driving cooking, being a business owner, whatever that may be, or athletic, musically, to an instrument, it takes a lot of time to learn something and to remind them and maybe humble them that change takes time. Change isn't overnight. Change takes guidance and mentorship and role models and a lot of failing until they succeed. And even when they succeed, they're going to fail a lot more. So saying, hey, this is a process to help get your son or daughter back on track. And then I guess this idea of level of engagement, I guess I'm trying to say is that we need their students to have buy in into that, like, negotiation. I definitely think it's a negotiation where previously the parents held all the power, so to speak, in middle school, elementary school, now they're actually trying to divide that power or

share that power so that the son or daughter becomes more independent. And so as much as they could have their student buy in and feel included and feel like they're decision maker at the table, the more effective it will be versus I'm just doing this to please my parents, but it's more of a game and then they'll forget and I'll go back into my old habits.

I think building off of that it's like and going back to workshopping with the students. Going through high school is a time of independence and a student is developing their own independence in their own personal roles in the family. So by having this conversation, including the student as part of the negotiation, it actually is going to also further build your relationship with the child, which long term leads to greater outcomes, academically, cognitively, greater positive attitudes and behaviors. So really just having them a part of the conversation and making them feel like they are a part of the decision really will build your relationship long term with them. So it's important to have that consistency, it's important to set expectations. But if we do that one week trial period, it doesn't work out. Okay, let's go back, let's revisit what worked, what did we like, what can we change for next time?

So really just going and having that conversation and making sure you do develop it more as a relationship than just putting the restraints on the child. And then with a plan like that, I assume there would be benchmarks certain periods of time where you look to see what progress or lack thereof has been made in any kind of modifications that might have to be made. And this kind of goes back to the whole commitment to this. They can't just give up if it doesn't work out after a week or so. It has to be ongoing. So that buy-in piece is very important, valuable. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work to set up, it's a lot of work to implement and it's more work to keep going over time. But that's also where you're going to model appropriate behavior. And if the parent is willing to reprioritize their life, because we're talking about one example here in video games, but you could replace that problem behavior with whatever's going on. If a parent is willing to reprioritize their life and prioritize the behavioral schedule of the whole family and the routines at home, it models the value of that target behavior for the kid that we're talking about, for younger siblings, for everyone involved. And it should be ongoing. So that way the child is also the adolescent is rewarded, is rewarded, but is validated for their change too. And they feel acknowledged and they feel recognized that I am making change, however so small.

But it's in the right direction. What you're describing is a more of a show me, don't tell me kind of approach. Like you want the child to be able to see what the behavior that they're trying to help that child evolve to or grow to is a key element here. Yes, with that warm and fuzzy authoritative, with those components still built in, though, that parent is also important to recognize that change is difficult for anyone, including parents, so it doesn't have to be. Or it's important to include those components of soft skills from parents recognition and appreciation and build some of that warm and fuzzy side like the non compliant student. It's no longer about just telling the student, don't do that anymore, I don't want you to do that anymore, and grounding them and doing all those kinds of typical kinds of reactions. It's got to go deeper than that.

Yeah, I mean, I was going to jump into, I guess, the thing in terms of like the change literature, how we could mobilize people. Yeah, of course, might have mentioned it before, but of course facts are helpful, but facts inevitably don't usually have the same power or influence or success as feeling, so to speak. So you could tell someone all the pitfalls of driving fast or you could get in an accident, you could have bodily harm, you could get a ticket, you could get pulled over, you could lose your license. Yeah, but the feeling of driving fast or the rush of that loud music is why people speed. And so you're trying to use their, hey, I know you love to drive fast. There is a track out east on Long Island. We can rent a car or a go cart or you can have this rush in a controlled environment. So you're acknowledging their love of driving, but in order to change the behavior, think, hey, I know you love to speed, let's do it at the raceway track where there's just one car going down a straightway versus you're going down to LIE with the potential of an accident or bodily harm or a ticket. So parents have this power to play these scenarios that touch upon their child's heart.

I think, along these same lines, communication wise, one of the skills that's so helpful in talking to teenagers in any context is learning to reflect back to them that you hear them. So as a parent, what this might look like is if they say, of course I'm wanting to play video games all the time instead of doing my homework, wouldn't you want to do that? My homework is really hard and I don't get it half the time. I want to give up. Right. So as a parent, rather than arguing with them back about the video games and how that's not as important to you or whatever, it might be important to just try to step back and reflect back to them. Wow, your homework really throws you for a loop. It's hard, it's frustrating, and you don't feel successful at it, and it makes you just want to quit sometimes and do something easier. Sometimes you'll get a lot out of them in terms of understanding what their perspective is and why they're fighting you on doing something or why a behavior is important to them, even though to you it seems like, well, this doesn't logically make sense. Of course I wouldn't want you to do that. So the better you can understand them and have a conversation where you show you respect them by sometimes just reflecting back and not offering any judgment, advice, questions or anything. It can go a really long way in terms of getting them to sign on, to possibly deciding on something with you or making a positive change or something like that.

I'm reminded of just this idea of why certain students might procrastinate. We had a presentation on it last maybe a year or two. They had in the mental health team talking about the triggers of why students procrastinate. And, like, they identified five or six fears that get in our way. So some students might be afraid of change, afraid of being known, afraid of other people's judgment, afraid of being successful or afraid of failure. So if those five parents could pinpoint which of those five fears might be the reason behind their child's, you know, delayed or procrastinated or avoidance of non compliance, that could help in that discussion.

That's a great point. Any last thoughts before we wrap up? One great resource for parents to know. It's really evidence-based for younger children aged two to seven, but it has a growing body of literature for adolescents with more significant disruptive behaviors. But it's a great resource to know of and potentially do some research into and pass along to anybody who's

maybe earlier on in their parenting career is the concept of, or the model of parent child interaction therapy. There's a number of local universities, Hofstra, Columbia, as well as private organizations in the Nassau County and Manhattan area, Child Mind Institute, Kurt Psychological, that offer this again, it's really for younger parents with younger kids, but it is expanding into adolescence. It's where you and your child would actually go to a certain place, and you would have trained psychologists and behavioral interventionists observing your interactions with your child. A lot of times they'll have a bug in the ear, like a bluetooth headset to kind of be coaching you through those interactions. And they'll actually get to see maybe some disruptive behavior, maybe some non compliance, and offer you suggestions of ways that you could increase compassion, increase positive affect, and strengthen the relationship with your child while still addressing non compliance or disruptive behavior. So that's a great model to look into.

Thank you. And I wanted to mention a book called *Surviving Your Child's Adolescence* by Carl Picard. I read it a while back, and it's just, generally speaking, a good set of ideas about how to understand adolescence, how to communicate with them, how to be an effective parent with them for really all kinds of kids. So today we've been talking about non compliant kids a lot, but a lot of our kids in this district also. And in general, it's more that maybe they have certain things that are hard for them and they avoid those things or they get anxious about those things. And how do you support a child and how do you not kind of enable them to avoid everything, right? So there are a lot of parenting dilemmas and challenges out there. It is a very hard job and that is one resource that I found to be a good starting point, for sure. I think we could spend multiple podcasts just talking on the difficulties being a parent. That said, I'd like to thank my guest in the mental health team, as always, for joining me. This has been another edition of Mental Health Corner. I'm Dan Holzman, principal of North High School. Thank you for joining us.

The Mental Health Corner Podcast is produced utilizing the equipment, facilities, students and staff at Great Neck North High School. I'm Talia Elyaho.