



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Back to School and Supporting Kids Through Transitions

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Rachel, Youth Advocate

Marissa: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic. This week, our topic is Back to School and Supporting Kids Through Transitions. We are your hosts: my name is Marissa, and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel, I'm one of the Youth Advocates here at The Women's Center.

I guess I'm going to need a little bit of an introduction as I am new to the podcast. But my name is Rachel, as I said, and I have a bachelor's degree in Social Work from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and I have been working at The Women's Center for two years now. And my role as a Youth Advocate is to provide one-on-one counseling and advocacy to children aged 6 to 17, and young adults aged 18 to the late 20s who have experienced domestic or sexual violence in their lifetime. I also work alongside the other advocates here at The Women's Center to support families who have been affected by violence on a holistic level.

Marissa: And today, as back to school time nears closer and closer, we thought it was important to talk about how to support kiddos in this transition.

Rachel: So, in order to support kiddos in this transition specifically, we have to talk about how to support children in general if there any changes or any strife that might be happening in their life.

So just getting into a little bit of the background of how to support children, we must understand that the behaviors that they are using, or they are exhibiting is a way that they are communicating with us how they feel. People are very smart, and at a young age we can express how a situation, or an event is making us feel without any words, or let people know that we're having a tough time by "acting out".

If we start to understand that a child's behavior is a natural way to communicate how they're feeling and what they need with adults, then we start to pay closer to into behavior they are exhibiting, and use that to focus our attention on, you know, talking with the child and that behavior and what is actually going on what the root causes. So, talking with our child about the responses you have noticed is the best way to begin that supportive dialogue with them in order to address the situation on both ends between you and your child. And it is the responsibility of parents, guardians and other supportive adults to talk with their children around them and help support them with whatever they might be feeling. If you look for those behavioral clues your child is giving you, you might be able to figure out what they might be thinking or feeling.

Marissa: Absolutely, as always, the best way to find that out is to communicate with them and show that you care about what they're going through, especially right now, as we approach this transition back to school. And I know there's a bunch of common responses that kiddos might be exhibiting right now as we go back to this, the school season, the school year.

Rachel: Yeah, and some of these responses that we'll talk about. Obviously, this is not a comprehensive list by any stretch of the imagination, but these are some examples of things that your child or child in your life might be exhibiting. It could be related to stress around going back to school. So, things like just having heightened anxiety, having difficulty sleeping or bad dreams, expressing feelings of dread, maybe some increased boredom. Maybe they're avoiding an activity that they used to enjoy. Maybe there's this sense of hyperactivity or need to complete a bucket list. Maybe your child's just talking about back to school all the time, bringing up the topic often. Maybe there's complete avoidance of the topic and maybe just overall heightened emotions within your child: easier responses, quicker responses to things.

Marissa: Absolutely. And, you know, with the with the circumstances we're under right now, in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic, these responses will likely be even more heightened. And remember, these kiddos haven't attended school since March if they are returning to school, or if they're returning to virtual school, maybe online school didn't go so well for them. They may be more anxious for some online classes this fall. This isn't an exhaustive list of examples, but this is just a little window into what these kiddos might be going through this time around.

Rachel: So now in the steps supporting a child, we've noticed the behavior that they're exhibiting and now we need to start the supportive dialogue. So, number one, we need to start by just saying that we are a safe adult. And in order to say that you are a safe adult, we need to understand what a safe adult is for a child. A safe adult is someone who will not judge them who will not laugh at them, who will not belittle them or otherwise make them feel bad while they're being vulnerable. Because at the end of the day, it is difficult for even adults to express their feelings, much more a child. A safe adult will also respect, and boundaries set by the child. This goes a long way. So, if you are willing to say you are a safe adult, then you need to follow through on that: you will not judge them laugh at them or otherwise be little them and continue that promise as much as is required.

Marissa: Absolutely, we've got to learn to walk the walk as well as talking the talk here.

Rachel: Yeah. And you know, once you've established that you're a safe adult and you've gained that child's trust, you need to discuss the behaviors that you've noticed, and ask the child why they might be expressing those behaviors. Kids often say why they are behaving the way they do. So, give them the opportunity to vocalize that. Ask more open-ended questions and repeat the information back to them as they express it. So for example, Marissa, I'm going to tell you that I am the child in this situation and I am getting mad at my sibling and maybe throwing toys at them. And you're gonna ask me why I'm doing that. And I will say, I guess I'm just feeling a lot of stress or I just don't know what to do with my anger right now. And kiddos are able to say those things. I'm just so mad.

Marissa: From there, we can ask how we can help and offer some of those examples of things you can do for them. Be honest about it though. If you are making all these promises that everything is going to be fixed and you can move mountains when you really can't in this moment, that's not going to go super far. Be honest about what you're able to help with, and if the child in your life makes a request that you cannot meet, tell them exactly why that's not a possibility and continue to offer some other options. Again, that number one rule here is don't offer something you are unwilling or unable to do.

Rachel: By following these, you know, generalized steps of starting that open discussion and dialogue with your child is again going to affirm that you are a safe adult.

Marissa: So, with these things in mind, let's actually start preparing for school in whatever format they may look like whether that's face-to-face or online.

Rachel: So, you know, let's begin with beginning to prepare for face to face school. One thing that I know especially for our young adults and teens, is a challenge is getting back into the school routine of waking up early. So maybe starting to encourage your child to wake up a couple hours earlier, two weeks, one week before school starts just to get back into the swing of not staying up till 4am, right?

Another thing we can do is increase structure in the daily routine of your family, whether that be by implementing morning routines and nighttime routines by creating lists of tasks that you expect the child to complete, and by what time you expect it to be done by or maybe even blocking out times when kids have free time versus when they're expected to be completing a task or engaging with a family.

Marissa: Another thing that a lot of students will be running into right now is the fact of wearing masks during school something that, you know, most kids have likely never had to experience in the classroom. So, it's really important to maybe start practicing wearing a mask, get the kiddos comfortable with them. If you have the ability to pick out you know, maybe a certain cloth mask that your kids really enjoy, you know, help them sort of start to take pride in what they're wearing, kind of like back to school shopping and outfits, get the kids excited about it and start to normalize this so when they are back in the classroom, it's less of a shock.

Rachel: Absolutely and kind of on the tail end of making it back to school shopping time, make the supplies and the school shopping for, you know, the folders and notebooks, make it fun. Include your child and getting supplies if you're able let them pick out one thing that feels like them. Whether that be a pencil case, a folder locker decorations. Also, if possible, make this a separate trip instead of adding it on to your grocery errands or additional things you might need to run. Making this just the opportunity for you and your child or children to get the things that are specifically for them.

Marissa: And we do know that sometimes this back to school shopping season can be a bit of a barrier, a financial barrier. If you need support in getting school supplies of any kind. Our agency offers that support. If you're in need contact us. For folks listening in who live outside of the Waukesha, Wisconsin area, check in with your local service provider in your area to see if there are any similar programs where you live.

Rachel: So now we've talked about how to prepare for face-to-face school. Let's start talking about if your child is going back to school online. And it's something that is pretty unfamiliar to most families unless you've been doing online classes for a while now. So, recognize the fact that this is different for both of you. And that's important to again, maintain that safe adult relationship so you can be open and honest about how you're feeling with your child. But first things first, let's start by again waking up early weeks before school starts. And again, we can talk about increasing that structure in our daily routines like implementing a morning and nighttime routine, but maybe this time we'll create a list of tasks for them to complete and hold them accountable for the time of day which they need to have it done. Practice making a daily schedule with time slots.

Something that we can talk about with creating structure once classes begin is planning for an activity to bring your child in or out of school. This will uphold boundaries and make your child feel more focused for during a classroom time. So far, an example of something to bring your child in and out of school when they come into school. Maybe they set up that time, their daily schedule for the day. And they set up their laptop that they need to do or their computer for their classes. And then when they come out of school, maybe it's leaving the space that they've been spending all their time as at the computer, taking some time away from the screen, and maybe engaging in a card game or board game or some outside time with the family.

Marissa: You can really get creative here too. It can be whatever you want to make it. You know, a fun example could be trying to make some sort of morning announcements with your family talking about you know, maybe what the weather's like, going over that schedule, making it fun, getting the kiddos excited to get into that classroom space, and, you know, make them feel like they can be engaged throughout the entire school day instead of just going through the motions. You know, doing this, that and the other zoom call until it's time to go.

And remember, above all else, make sure to keep it consistent. Try not to bite off more than you can chew and take baby steps for yourself and your family. This is very much brand new. And it's okay to, you know, sort of make mistakes in the beginning but know that you're in it together and, you know, try to keep it as consistent as possible.

Rachel: This is where it's really important to recognize that you are the expert of your own family. So, you know, take what we're saying with a grain of salt and, you know, use it and adjust it to whatever works for you.

Marissa: Absolutely, and I want to add another quick note on routines, particularly if your child spends time between your home and another parents home, it can be challenging to ensure that they're able to maintain the routines that help keep them

focused. This is a reason that it can be so important to involve the children in creating their own routines and trying to make it special. That gives kiddos more autonomy to do these routines for themselves, not just because mom or dad want them to do this routine. It helps them sort of take ownership and what they're doing and again, get them excited for their day. We offer quite a few resources on creating a daily schedule. We will link that below this podcast on our website and it's also under our children's programming tab on our website.

Rachel: Just a quick note—kind of going back to you know, you are the authority and the expert on your own family. It's important to recognize that especially in the times of COVID-19, things are changing rapidly and it's okay if something had used or done in the past to prepare for transitions is not working this year.

As parents, we can only control so much. So, finding what is within your grasp is super important when things happen that are out of our control. We can more quickly hope and healthfully make adjustments for our children and help them recognize what they can and cannot do in situations.

Marissa: Consistency really is key here. So, take this one step at a time. We are going to keep reminding you that you are the expert of your own family. So, make those changes that you find beneficial and relevant to your family dynamic, you know, don't try to make a mold that your family does not fit in, personalize it, make it you, and take it slow too. These are really, really big changes that so many families have had to take and sort of navigate through. And you're not alone here. A lot of parents are learning this together more or less and it's definitely okay to not have all the answers right now either.

Rachel: Exactly. And we wish you the best of luck in preparing your children for this upcoming school year. We also wish you the best of luck in using these kind of tools to help your child through any transition that might become prevalent in your family.

Marissa: Absolutely, and you know, if you feel like you would like some support on these topics, feel free to contact us. And once again, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation on back to school and Supporting kids through transitions. Our next session will be titled yes means yes. demystifying consent, and that'll be with our violence prevention advocate, Susannah.

And again, if you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about the women's center at www.twcwaukesha.org. Thank you and be well.