On Your Mind, Jan-Feb, 2021

**Education Theme**

**Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

**Contributing Columnist**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

So, my son is crashing. He’s a senior in high school this year. His school has been off and on with in-school classes. The virtual stuff isn’t working for him. Now, he’s out for Thanksgiving and just got word, because of our “hot spot,” that his school will not open again until after New Year’s Day. Usually he is a diligent student, fun guy, joker in his crowd, but now? Sullen, biting, withdrawn. Signed, Help!!

Dear Help!!

Sadly, this is not the senior year your son was looking forward to. It sounds like there’s not much familiar that he can count on. It’s taken its toll on him. I’ve got several thoughts.

First, get meaningful time with him. Knock on his bedroom door and ask if you can come in. Getting permission from a child increases their interest in what you have to say. If he declines, don’t go in, but rather find another time to try again.

When you do get permission, sit on his bed and just be there. Well-intended lectures, excuses, and suggestions will fall flat and push him away. When he gets uncomfortable with your silence and asks what you want. Just tell him you notice his struggle and just want to listen.

If he doesn’t respond to your “essay question,” then make it a “multiple choice question.” That is, comment on ways his life is different now with school and the pandemic. If he responds, then go all-in with active listening, helping him express and expand his feelings. Acknowledge the feelings he shares, help him own them, and if he will let you, hold him tight.

Second, after you think you’ve gotten through to him and he has physically relaxed his tension, offer to brainstorm suggestions as to how he can deal with his current realities. Help him parcel out and plan his days, even using a dry erase wall calendar. Don’t tell him what to do, even though any parent would want to. Because he’s almost grown, your role is secondary and supportive, guiding and advising with permission.

Finally, if his somber mood persists, despite your best efforts, consider that he might be clinically depressed and need to be in therapy for a while. This might be just the thing to help him feel that he’s back in control of his life and that there is hope. With a pandemic vaccine on the way, we all can begin to feel hopeful. Stay in touch.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My restaurant work stopped back in April. Our finances took a hit, but I’ve been able to recoup some with my new delivery job with Door Dash. However, our “new normal” is driving us crazy. My husband and I are alternating child care with our 5 year old. His virtual kindergarten class is a nonstarter. While his teacher tries to keep the zoom class engaged, 5 year olds can only stare at a computer screen for so long. How do we tend to our handful son, keep our jobs and household income, and keep our sanity? Signed, Frantic

Dear Frantic,

Five year olds are a handful under any circumstances. Good for you for hanging in there, both with jobs and family. Hopefully, this collective insanity around the pandemic will end soon, with vaccine on the way.

Let’s talk about what you are doing right. You are balancing work and home. All are sleeping, eating, working, and playing daily. You and hubby are “tag team” parenting your little one. One of you is “it” and the other is not, alternatively. This gives you time to be your best for your child and also for yourself.

Generally, keep doing what works for your family. Keep a schedule for work, school, meals, recreation, and sleep. When your 5 year old is “done” on task, stop what you are doing and tend to him. Use active listening to understand what his young mind is dealing with. Use time limits, rewards, and consequence to help him finish tasks. Use time out to correct his miss-steps. Use a lot of modeling and positive reinforcement to highlight what he is doing right and to get back on track. Let both him and hubby know when you need “me time” to recharge. Hang in there. These adverse circumstances will eventually be just a memory.