



**Parenting the Mental Health Generation Podcast
Season 4 Episode 3
When the World Feels Like Too Much Helping Kids Process
the Information Overload
TRANSCRIPT**



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Introduction

[00:00:00] **Amy O.:** Welcome. I'm Amy O, the founder of CATCH, Community Action, together for Children's Health, based in Chicago's northern suburbs, and this is Parenting the Mental Health Generation. Today we invited Karen Cloyd to join me in a conversation that I think will feel important and relevant to every parent listening.

Karen is a therapist with 25 years under her belt, and she shares some gems as we discuss how to make space and talk with our kids about the constant stream of images and news to which they're exposed these days and why it's critical to do just that. Karen and I examine how to help our kids identify and navigate the feelings that inevitably arise in the constant barrage of information.

We discuss how to help them distinguish what's true and what isn't, what's important and what might be less so, and what's theirs and what is not, so they can maintain a sense of self and autonomy. In the whirlwind, Karen emphasizes the importance of making space in our families for real connection. So that when difficult conversations about today's news, events, or gossip are needed, they have a familiar place and feel normal and safe.

She also reminds us we are all doing our best. We will not get it all right. The world is at odds and changing constantly. Parenting today is hard. New information is on the tips of our tongues and at the tips of our fingers all the time. It's overwhelming even for us. But there are things we can do to set a tone.



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So our kids allow us to help them process and understand all of it just a little better and more appropriately. So wherever you are, put in your earbuds or turn us up in the car and take this 30 minutes for you. Join my conversation with Karen Cloyd.

Conversation

Welcome to the podcast, Karen Cloyd. We are so happy that you joined us today.

I know we both share a concern about the speed and relentlessness with which our kids are receiving news. And, often with graphic images. The world is upside down in many ways and ever changing. So I really look forward to digging into how parents can best guide their kids and facilitate conversations in this stressed-out news field environment.

So welcome.

[00:02:39] **Karen:** Thanks. Thanks, Amy. I am looking forward to our conversation today.

[00:02:44] **Amy O.:** So let's just start with the feels. CATCH talks often about the importance of talking about and identifying with your kids their feelings, and assuming that the news of the minute is making our kids feel things the way it is us. What do you see our job as parents to be in helping them navigate those feelings? How do we open up conversations around how they're feeling as a result of seeing and understanding what's going on?

[00:03:22] **Karen:** Yeah, that's, that's a really good question. First, I want to name, even though I'm a mental health clinician who has a lot of experience working with kids and families, I am not a parent. So what I share is going to be based on my professional experience more than my own personal experience. So I just want to name that. Also, I just want to name, I have nieces and nephews and stuff like that too. So I am seeing stuff in my personal life as well as professional life. Oftentimes



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when I am interacting with families for the first time it's because there's some sort of crisis happening.

It could be like specifically in the moment, it could be related to things that are going on in the world around us. And I am definitely seeing that young people are coming in with a lot more thoughts and feelings about the things that are going on in the world than maybe I would've even noticed like five to 10 years ago.

So it's definitely happening. Kids are having lots of thoughts and feelings about stuff and figuring out how to support them I can imagine, can be a little bit of a daunting task, especially if parents are also having their own thoughts and feelings about everything that's going on too. With that in mind, the first thing I want for parents to try to remember is that you're already doing your best and that's all we can ever expect from you.

There's no such thing as perfection. Even if there are quote unquote mistakes, there are always opportunities to go back and repair those mistakes or do things differently. And kids and young people really, really benefit from parents and other adults around them who are able to be accountable. Do the best that they can.

[00:05:12] **Amy O.:** Don't panic at the moment that you have to solve it, or fix it, or make sure that the conversation is quote unquote right.

[00:05:22] **Karen:** Yes. Of course, telling somebody not to panic is like sometimes telling them not to breathe. So try to do the best that you can. The first thing that I usually encourage around this though is that you take a moment to connect to some sort of sense of calm or regulation. So we read the news and I'm sure we all have those moments where we're just like, oh my gosh. And so we have to take a moment to take a breath, think to ourselves, what do I want to be able to communicate with my young person at this point? And try to approach it from a calm or regulated space as well as we can. Sometimes it's going to feel like a fire and that we have to immediately react. And trying to



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take a minute to take a breath and respond is one of the most helpful things that parents or other adults in our kids' lives can do right now.

[00:06:25] **Amy O.:** I appreciate that reminder so much because we encourage a lot of the parents who engage with CATCH to respond rather than react whenever they can. So that your kid sees someone who is as calm as they can be and also really giving a place of safety for connection? Is that what you're kind of getting at?

[00:06:57] **Karen:** Yeah. A regulated adult is one of the most beneficial things that young people can experience, especially when things feel very chaotic. It's not always going to be easy for us to become regulated, especially if we're being impacted by the information or the experience, just like the children around us. And so finding that moment to come to a place of regulation, you might not be calm, but getting to a place where you can at least be regulated helps to show young people and kids that the world is safer than they might think it is in the moment. That there are people here who can help and who can support, and who will listen and validate and help them understand their own thoughts and feelings too.

[00:07:48] **Amy O.:** So once you are sort of at that place as best you can be, I know it's not easy these days with everything that's happening. But once you're there, do you have some suggestions as to how parents can then inquire about or open up a conversation about not just what they've seen and heard and are trying to process, but really truly how it's making them feel. Like what it's left them with.

[00:08:20] **Karen:** Yeah. I usually encourage folks to take a stance of like curiosity, and I think about this from the perspective of like, we know that kids are getting exposed to all sorts of information, and so I like to assume that there's at least some level of knowledge that kids have about some of the things that are going on. I think really specifically like hyperlocal information, like with the schools and all of the social media groups that young people might belong to. If something has happened at a local school or within the community, it's more likely than not that kids will have some



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information about that. Going beyond that, just given the amount of media that young people are consuming these days, they probably have awareness of a lot of the other things that are going on in the world as well. And so I would take a stance of like, assuming that they have some information while also trying to approach them from a stance of curiosity. So I think about this as using more open-ended kinds of questions. Like, what are you thinking about what you saw, or what you've been seeing in your news feeds on your social media recently. That might be a way to approach it. There might also be some times where it's like, I'm aware that this happened. I'm wondering if you wanted to spend some time talking about it or if there's any questions that you have or if there's any things that I, that you need that I can help you with.

[00:09:59] **Amy O.:** Is it important for parents to be vulnerable and model their own feelings or reactions to events?

[00:10:07] **Karen:** Absolutely.

[00:10:08] **Amy O.:** I read on my social media that, X, Y, Z happened at the school, and it made me angry, scared, whatever. Is that important?

[00:10:20] **Karen:** I think yes. And I think figuring out when to share that is important too. So on the one hand, we want kids to see that adults can have feelings. That they can talk about feelings. That they can regulate their feelings, and we also want to leave space for the kids to be able to share whatever it is that they're experiencing without it necessarily being, and I don't like this word, but it's the best one I can come up with, but without it being contaminated by the adults around them. <Mm-hmm I get that> I think older kids like the tweens and teens, they're much better at being able to separate out what they're feeling, than what the other people around them are feeling. The younger kids are still very reliant on the folks around them to interpret and understand their own emotions, like that co-regulation is still very prominent with them. However I could see a younger kid being able to say, you know, I heard about this. I'm wondering how you're feeling about it. And if they're struggling to identify feelings, then it might be a time to throw out, you know, well these are



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ways that I could imagine people might be feeling, like they might feel scared to hear this, or they might feel worried or, you know, when I heard this, I kind of felt a little bit like this. Is that something that you experienced too?

[00:11:43] **Amy O.:** That comment and observation brings me to a question that I really wanted to ask you today. And that is you know, this podcast goes out to parents of kids of all ages. And from littles to high school to even young adults. And, and I know this is an enormous question and hard for you to answer in like a succinct way, but is there some way that you could generally help us understand what is developmentally manageable for kids say in lower elementary school, Upper elementary school, when it comes to the bombardment of information that they're getting from the internet, from friends, from buzz that they hear, is there some way to kind of help us understand how to approach different ages?

[00:12:39] **Karen:** Yes, and

[00:12:42] **Amy O.:** Good luck.

[00:12:44] **Karen:** Yeah. So, yes, and I mean it's going to vary not just by ages, but also just developmental levels and like the context of the family system. And there's going to be all sorts of contextual information that may, may contribute to that. So I am aware that folks are trying to, at times, minimize the amount of access that younger kids have to the media. I think that can be really beneficial just because from a brain development stance, taking in all of that information all the time can be really overwhelming to a younger kid's neurological system. And that can contribute to them having a lot of emotional discomfort. Now knowing that you can't monitor your kids' access to stuff all the time, knowing that like little Johnny who rides the bus with you like Susie to school may have a phone that he pulls out of his pocket and was like, did you see this? Even if you're little, Susie doesn't have that. I think trying to be aware of what your kids are being exposed to. How much of it is one of the first pieces, regardless of age? When I think about with younger kids and actually when I think



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about this with any young people, I think one of the most important things is being able to respond from a fact-based space.

You know, when, when stuff happens in our communities or in the world, there's oftentimes lots going around about like, oh, why did it happen? Or who did it? So there's often lots of speculation and there's lots of information that may or may not be accurate. And so being able to provide and or reinforce accurate information, I think is the first piece. Then the language that you use to support your children in understanding that would be the next piece. I'm imagining that many parents, especially if they have multi-aged kids, would be able to contextualize the difference between a conversation with a 15-year-old versus like a 10-year-old. Vocabulary is just going to be different. Language is going to be different. Conceptual understanding of things is just going to be different. And so just kind of trying to connect to your kids where they are in terms of their understanding and language, I think is one of the best approaches that people can take. I also know that sometimes folks are concerned about younger kids having too much information. And I think that there's a way to filter it to them that gives them something that will help them understand the situation, while also reinforcing that they're in a safe space with safe adults and that the adults are there to provide that safety and that understanding.

[00:15:51] **Amy O.:** How does a parent, I guess I'm just sort of imagining my own newsfeed, which I realize is an adult newsfeed. <Mm-hmm> But it is constant. <Mm-hmm> I mean, it is literally every, all the time, constant. How does a parent decide about what to engage? About how far to prod? Do we wait for our kids to exhibit signs of discomfort or worry? Do we assume, like you said earlier, that they have some knowledge of things and bring it up ourselves? I know we're speaking in generalities here, but I'm trying to help parents understand. Sometimes the tendency might be to just ignore it and hope to God they haven't heard about it. You know, we're at war now. We have a lot of tension politically in our country. I would imagine that sometimes it just must be easier to cross your fingers and hope they haven't heard about it.



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[00:16:58] **Karen:** Oh, for sure. I would imagine that that's something that a lot of parents experience. I experienced that myself, not even having kids where sometimes I just want to be able to zone out, turn it off, and not communicate with anybody about it. And then when it comes to picking or choosing moments with kids or, other young people, to bring this stuff up, one of the things I usually try to support families with is creating a culture of communication within their families. Where talking about stuff like checking in about day-to-day activities, how people are feeling, what their hopes and dreams and worries and stuff, where that's just something that's baked into the family system so that when things like wars happen or tragic community events happen, it's not going to feel as out of the blue or weird for a parent to approach their kid and be like, Hey, so I heard about this. What do you think about that?

[00:18:07] **Amy O.:** So normalizing talk around emotions essentially. <Yes.> Normalizing talk around our own status, where we are. And that includes parents sharing that stuff too, right, Karen?

[00:18:22] **Karen:** Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Not all families have this, but most families have at least some part of the day where they're all together in some way, shape, or form, even if it's just for a short period of time. Where everybody can go around and be like, here's one thing that I felt happy about today and here's one thing I wish had been able to go differently. Even just doing that on a regular basis, starts to teach that communicating about the whole breadth of our experience is important and it's something that's valued. I also think like even in families where people can't always connect with each other, if there's like little note boards that you can write to each other. Just like finding a way to incorporate some sort of regular communication that's about more than, did you get your homework done? Here's your lunch. What do you want for dinner? What's on the calendar? But like really sitting down and being like, so mom, what was one thing about your day today that you felt good about?

[00:19:28] **Amy O.:** Yeah, I want to put a pin in that piece right there. 'cause one of the things I had hoped to get to with you before our conversation was over was a couple of little nuggets that parents could take from this chat and really try to utilize, and I think what you just identified is super



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important and our busy lives sometimes don't make room for just that. That just connection on a level that makes it normal and comfortable to, to really understand where we're at rather than what we want to eat for dinner, as you said. And then when things are. Tough or scary or ugly or overwhelming, it's more natural to have a place to talk about them. I really like that Karen, and I'd like that to be one of the things that we urge parents to walk away from this conversation with. I think that's great. I want to move on to something that CATCH identified as really wanting to pick your brain about. And that is this whole idea that we all are struggling with, I think of being desensitized to news of any magnitude. If you look at your own feed, you have how to take care of your orchid, kitty cat videos, and then the war, and they all hold equal importance in your feed or in the way in which a lot of us are getting our news now. What does that do to a kid? Does it dull their range of emotions? Does it make it hard for them to understand real joy and real sadness and fear? And how do we help our kids? Not go there, I guess, for lack of a better word.

[00:21:30] **Karen:** Yeah, that, that's a good question. It's also a hard one. Part of the reason I think it's hard is because the research on the impact of social media exposure on developing brains is still relatively new-ish and it's still constantly evolving. I can say that what I experience is inconsistent. I don't experience anything across the board with every young person that I interact with. What we are seeing though, and I don't know the exact correlation around this, but what we do see is higher rates of anxiety for sure in young people. And some of that could be because of the information that they're taking in. Some of it could be the way in which they're taking the information in just in general. And it could be like a combination of all of the things. My experience with young people is that, how do I want to say this? I am not experiencing them as being able to not tell the difference between things that are joyful to them and things that are frightening to them. I think what I'm experiencing more is their ability to notice the smaller intensities of those things are maybe becoming a little bit different. So for example maybe going to Six Flags with your friends is like a super high like joy experience and, going to school and getting bullied by somebody is a super high like painful experience. There's still a lot that happens between those two polarized kinds of sides of it. And so being able to tap into moments where it's like, oh, I got to get ice cream with my friend, even though it wasn't like the best thing that happened to me, like the whole month, it was still a



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nice time. Or so and so at school gave me a compliment. So I see it more as like there's a higher polarization sometimes of the experience of emotions.

[00:23:44] **Amy O.:** I understand what you're saying. I guess when I'm wondering is, for example, this will, um, age me here, but what the heck. I was six when Bobby Kennedy died.

[00:23:58] **Karen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:23:59] **Amy O.:** And I have the clearest memory of being asked to go to the backyard and wait while my parents wept their way through the funeral.

[00:24:11] **Karen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:24:11] **Amy O.:** That is an event that I know exactly where I was, with whom I was, and how it felt. Et cetera. I know that the producer of this pod, Anne, remembers really clearly where she was, with whom she was, when the space shuttle exploded.

[00:24:29] **Karen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:24:30] **Amy O.:** We have these canon events in our lives that are important and marked us in a way and that we had to sort of process through with ourselves and our parents. Are those events becoming all muddled for our kids into one sort of fast-moving world? And is that important? And is it something that we need to really notice and be aware of?

[00:25:02] **Karen:** Yeah, that, that makes a lot of sense to me. And, and like I'm thinking about myself too, like I also had the Challenger experience. I also was a little bit older, but still like with 9/11, definitely have that. And I recall when it was announced that we were going into Desert Storm, like I was in high school at that time, and I very clearly remember when and where I was. What I've seen is that information comes out so much faster now and on so many different avenues that sometimes



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people may not have that same, like we're all together and we all kind of have this moment of being like, oh wow. At the same time

[00:25:53] **Amy O.:** also, which I think in and of itself is comforting.

Right. Yeah.

[00:25:59] **Karen:** Yeah, it absolutely can be. It can also contribute to how our brain stores the information. So the context under which we experience information may have an impact on how it's retained. So if I'm around a whole bunch of people who get some bad news all at the same time, and we collectively have a strong response to that bad news. It may be stored differently than if I'm in my room looking at the news on my own, and I get that bad news. It's not necessarily good or bad that the brain is storing it differently. It's just different because of the context. At the same time, I'm also aware that our young people, like any of them that were alive in 2020, like they have a year-long canon event that sort of happened at times in their development that they may or may not have been able to really make meaning of it in the same way that the adults experienced it did. Then thinking about current issues, I think that we're all just being so inundated with so much information all of the time that it may be hard for us to sort out which pieces are really important or might be life changing or culture changing or society changing versus not.

[00:27:35] **Amy O.:** And we just kind of have to accept that as parents that we don't really know how to do this yet. I think that's important because it feels as though the burden is on us to sort of disseminate that in some way. But maybe it's just as important to say we're working on it and we're not exactly sure how best to do it yet. I think that's actually a really helpful

[00:28:04] **Karen:** mm-hmm.

[00:28:05] **Amy O.:** Bit.



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[00:28:06] **Karen:** And I also want to say even on top of that, it might not even be like needing to disseminate, but more of just being able to name, like, I am aware that you are getting so much information from so many different places and that maybe that might feel confusing or that you might have a hard time figuring out like what's real, what's not, what do you need to pay attention to. And I want to make myself a resource for us to sit down and have conversations about this.

[00:28:36] **Amy O.:** Yeah.

[00:28:36] **Karen:** So that we can collectively understand it.

[00:28:40] **Amy O.:** Helping them acknowledge that this really is a lot. Yes. Helping them understand that this is a lot and that you're there to help them try to sort it at least as best you can. I think that's great. Yeah. We're going to wrap this up shortly. It's been such a good conversation, really, Karen, thanks. I'm so appreciative. You're very thoughtful. One other thing that came to mind for us that I think, well, I know in my own personal experience with my daughter's journey, that another outcome of this sort of constant input of information and a feed that is never ending is this idea of comparing ourselves to others that we see in media, on social media, et cetera,

[00:29:40] **Karen:** mm-hmm.

[00:29:42] **Amy O.:** Are our kids struggling with this idea of, How am I different from them? How am I separate? How am I other from what I'm seeing, and am I good enough? Will I ever be good enough? It, you know, does that make sense? I don't even know if there's a question in there, but like, is it important for, I guess the question is, is it important for us as parents to help our kids really understand. A, the nature of media and social media and B, that we are our own selves. And that comparison truly is the thief of joy.

[00:30:26] **Karen:** Yes, and brains really like to compare. It's just a normal, natural thing that our brains do. You can see it as kids are developing where it's like, okay, all the cars get arranged



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together, all the colors. It's a thing that our brains do as part of our instinctual survival-like response. We have to be able to do that. I think that comparison, especially once you get into the tween and teen age is a normal part of development also because of that drive to be more connected to our peer groups. I think what we're seeing that's different now than maybe when we were kids is there are so many more points of being able to make those comparisons than when we were younger. It's a normal thing. I'm sure at some point in time in all of our lives we had moments of comparing ourselves to the people around us and to what we were seeing in the media and stuff like that. I think it's happening more now because of the constant ability to be exposed to people that one could compare themselves to. Most people try to project an image on social media that they want people to see, like this is how they want people to see them. And sometimes young people don't always have the skill to be able to understand that nuance. And so starting from an early age with giving education to kids about why do we compare ourselves to each other? What is social media? How does it work? Why does it do the things that it does? Being able to help them understand like they're designed specifically with these algorithms to get you to behave in a certain way. So starting to have those conversations with kids at a younger age, similarly, to like sexual development, where you want to start having the conversations with them before they're actually doing this stuff so that they at least have a foundation. And then continuing to do that can be beneficial.

[00:32:45] **Amy O.:** And maybe adding to that menu, Karen, is sharing with your kids what you value in them.

[00:32:54] **Karen:** Yes.

[00:32:55] **Amy O.:** What do you find most valuable in a person and thus in them, you know?

[00:33:01] **Karen:** Mm-hmm.



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[00:33:02] **Amy O.:** Honesty, humor, whatever it might be that you look for in human beings, um mm-hmm. So that they can feel a sense of, you know, their own autonomy, their own ability to navigate the world regardless of this natural need to compare. Does that mm-hmm sound right?

[00:33:24] **Karen:** Absolutely. Like something that just popped into my mind is because of just how brains work, our brains are more likely to hold on to things that are perceived as like negative or potentially threatening than things that are perceived as positive or like

[00:33:41] **Amy O.:** Really, I've never noticed.

[00:33:44] **Karen:** It's like an actual, but it's, I mean, it's a neurological piece of it, right? We have to be able to know if the snake is poisonous or not. And so what I am often encouraging folks to do is being able to notice the positive part of our brain. When kids are coming home and they're like, so-and-so said this about me, and so-and-so said this about me, and there's all of these negative things that they're hearing. Or if they're saying like, well, I didn't have this thing that so and so had. Validating their experience with it, and then also helping them to shift into a bigger picture where it's like, okay, it's true. You don't have this super expensive sweatshirt that so and so does. Let's see if we can take a bigger picture and look at some of the other aspects of your life that may be more fulfilling or that may be more positive, while also acknowledging that there are things that a young person wishes could be different too. But it's a skill that we have to use. And we're not always great at using it.

Conclusion

[00:34:55] **Amy O.:** And that kind of brings us all the way around to, you know, we're never going to be perfect at this parenting thing. And it's important to try things and to say things and to be vulnerable with our kids and admit when we need to have a redo.

[00:35:18] **Karen:** For sure.



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[00:35:19] **Amy O.:** Yeah. Especially in this world. You have been remarkably candid and really warm and fun, and I am very grateful that you came on today, Karen. This will help a lot of people.

[00:35:30] **Karen:** Thank you. I'm glad that I was able to contribute in a meaningful way.

[00:35:35] **Amy O.:** Absolutely.

Thank you for listening. These days in a world of constant information and image, we may be tempted to cross our fingers and hope that our kids haven't heard the news or are blissfully unaware of the events of the day. But more often than not, our children are exposed to the world's goings on from one source or another.

It's our responsibility as their parents and caregivers to provide safe and welcoming spaces within our families where they can lean on us to help them process what they've seen and heard. Today we were again reminded to arrive at conversations with our kids from a place of thoughtful response, not immediate knee-jerk reaction, however difficult that may be. We were urged to help our kids distinguish between truth and fiction, where possible, and to acknowledge that with the fast pace of the information network today, we may not always get things right. The most important thing is setting a tone in which our kids feel safe and ready to share their feelings and experiences so we can help them navigate through. We were reminded that comparison is a normal brain function, especially in the pre-teen and teenage years of development. Technology has provided an unhealthy number of comparison points to our kids, and we can help them identify that and see themselves as enough as they are. Even through the blur. But it's important to know what your kids are seeing and how they are feeling and processing the information. Self-worth is fragile and we must be aware and nurture our children with vigilance.

Episode Action Item



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Here's your action items for this episode of Parenting the Mental Health Generation. Learn what your kids are seeing and hearing. Be curious. Prioritize connection with your children and find a regular time to normalize conversation about feelings and vulnerabilities including yours.

Some of the news to which our kids are exposed in this ever-changing world may cause them to experience big feelings or feel overwhelmed. Use the safe place you've created to help them process and better understand with your guidance.

We'll not always get it right. Because we too experience powerful emotions under the relentless barrage of information. That's okay. It's our job to be there for our kids.

Many thanks to Karen Cloyd, of [Family Service Center](#) in Northfield, Illinois for this wonderful and helpful conversation. And thank you for being part of this community and for doing the brave work of parenting. We'll see you next time on Parenting the Mental Health Generation.

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