Diving in the Deep End: Family-school partnerships to address student mental health

In this debut episode of Family-to-Family, we hear from three families as they share their experiences recognizing and responding to their child’s mental health needs in partnership with their school. Amy Welly, Michelle Tuite, and Christina Chalmers all care for school-age children in Ohio and provide unique perspectives on identifying mental health concerns in the children they care for and how they engaged with their child's schools to address them head-on. We will also hear from Patrick Cunningham, Graduate Research Associate at the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center as he provides the perspective of a school counselor on this much-requested topic.

For more information and resources on the topics discussed in today’s show, please visit [ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/podcast](https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/podcast/). Connect with us on Twitter: [@OhioEngage](https://twitter.com/OhioEngage), [@ThomasCapretta](https://twitter.com/ThomasCapretta), and [@Fara\_Allen](https://twitter.com/fara_allen). Like us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/OhioSFEC](https://www.facebook.com/OhioSFEC). For other inquiries and feedback, please reach us at OhioSFEC@osu.edu.

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# Episode Transcript

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**Christina Chalmers:** As they were attending school, it became apparent that they were struggling with some mental health issues. My oldest grandson struggles a lot. My granddaughter she’s in second grade this year, she also was showing signs of struggling with mental health. And you know, you’re just trying to figure out is it they’re not, you know, understanding what’s going on, or is it, they have something going on emotionally.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Welcome to Family-to-Family. This is a podcast for families by families on topics and questions about the education system in Ohio. I am your host, Thomas Capretta, coming to you from the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at THE Ohio State University. Now let’s get to sharing Family-to-Family.

[Music]

**Thomas Capretta:** How are you, Fara?

**Fara Allen:** Hey, I’m great, how are you, Tom?

**Thomas Capretta:** Oh, I’m fantastic and I’m happy to be here for our first episode.

**Fara Allen:** So, what are we going to talk about today?

**Thomas Capretta:** Well, you know, we’ve polled parents throughout Ohio on what topics or questions they’re thinking about most often when it comes to the education system. And mental health came up again, and again, and again.

**Fara Allen:** Man, I did. This one really hit home. It was amazing to see all of the challenges people are navigating with their children as they struggle with mental health issues and the dedication and effort they put into finding solutions for these challenges with their children’s schools.

**Thomas Capretta:** I couldn’t agree more. Now, I do want to inform our listeners that these conversations do touch on sensitive issues, including depression and suicide. So, listener discretion is advised.

**Fara Allen:** Are you ready to get started?

**Thomas Capretta:** I am. Let’s get started sharing family to family.

[Music]

**Amy Welly:** My name is Amy Welly. She has always been this happy go lucky kid. I mean she's been picked on all the way through school, but she never really let it get to her.

**Thomas Capretta:** Amy is a parent from Northwest Ohio. Here she is talking about her middle school aged daughter.

**Amy Welly:** She'd always been this happy go lucky kid. And then, last year in the first half of the school year, she did virtual learning. Second semester, she went back to the building. Well, when she went back to the building, there was an event that happened that took her a year to tell us about. But my husband and I, a lot of people look down on us as parents for this, but my husband I when it comes to our teenagers, we’re the parents that we're going to go through your computers, we're going to go through your phone, you know, we're going to find out what's going on. So, going through her computer and her homework assignments and stuff like that, my husband had started noticing some of the songs she listened to were starting to change. Some of the song lyrics that she was copying and pasting to Facebook… A lot of the stuff that she was writing started centering around depression, suicide, and stuff like that, and he questioned her. He had questioned her many times, you know, are you depressed, is something going on, is there something you want to talk to me about? and she just kept saying, no I’m fine, I just like the song. We had kept noticing it. Then, this year in eighth grade, she had started having some severe anxiety.

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**Christina Chalmers:** My name is Christina Chalmers. My husband and I became a kinship family two years ago, so we are raising three of our grandchildren. Currently their ages are ten, eight, and six. The children come from a background of both parents are addicts. So, they had exposure to things in their early childhood that no child should have to experience. They often also suffered from severe neglect. You know, so lack of structure, no discipline, no routines, you know, things like that. So, I’m just kind of getting them integrated into our local school is kind of how we started on this journey.

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**Michelle Tuite:** So, I prefer Queen of the world, however, for this just call me Michelle. So, I have a fantastic family. And, you know, met-married my husband after I got a bachelor's in education, and we found out we were pregnant and had our first little girl. And, you know, everything was just kind of wonderful. You know, he had two children from a prior relationship that I would advocate for at school, just you know behavioral things going through like divorce issues and that sort of thing. And then our child, my daughter, was just absolutely, I would say, textbook, a textbook kiddo. Did everything, met her milestones, did everything that she was supposed to do, and seemed to, you know, just be a piece of cake. And then, when she was nine years old, I got word that one of our family members was going to be incarcerated and she had just given birth to a child who was ten weeks old. And so, we stepped up and decided to take the child in kinship and not really understanding what that was. And so, Skylar joined our household. She was 11 weeks at the time, failure to thrive, had been born drug addicted, had been through some real trauma in that short amount of time. And we worked through the job family services of Lucas County. We lived in Toledo, at the time. And we were able to bring her home and kind of very vested in her and she is now 16 years old. We were able to adopt her when she was three years old and that began my entire paradigm shift and advocating for kiddos that come from those types of situations. That’s not supposed to happen to your family, right, like that doesn't happen to us that's the people across the street, and it was very real for us.

**Thomas Capretta:** Three families. Three different school ages. Three different backgrounds. Three stories of their children struggling with their mental health and wellness. Dips in mental health can affect all of us, no matter our story. Let’s hear how these families sought to address the struggles of their children alongside their schools.

**Michelle Tuite:** We were able to go through that entire process and as painful as it was at times, we were able to gain lots of knowledge, lots of resources, partners along the way, and I do believe that that is what has helped me become an educator focused on families.

**Michelle Tuite:** I get really excited talking about this because Skylar is my great niece first, I mean that's how she was born. She is my daughter; she will always be my daughter, my baby, and she is actually the catalyst for why I believe my platform for mental health is so so strong and stable. Skyler was identified diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome ADHD. We went on to identify her with sensory processing disorder and, most recently was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety that was probably about three or four years ago.

**Michelle Tuite:** What we saw when we had this child because people hear nature versus nurture. So, hey she’s living in a very stable home, both parents are working, we are engaged, we're in a church family, and so what problems could there possibly be. And that became very clear, we had a child who was unable to articulate how she felt. There was confusion, she would bite herself to calm, she would hit her head against the floor, she would scream. There were just so many things that, just as I said, with my first child, we had no experience with that at all.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Here, Amy discusses her child’s intense feelings after experiencing a serious and traumatic event.

**Amy Welly:** She then tells me and her mom that when it happened, she had thoughts of suicide, because she didn't know how to process any of the information and that the only thing that stopped there was that she knew her younger siblings were going to miss her. So, I mean we're working through it now. She's at that point talking to the guidance counselor. The guidance counselor had informed us that there was a mental health counselor that come from an office over in Upper Sandusky to the to do counseling with the kids at the school. So, she started counseling with the mental health professionals that come in. So, she is doing counseling now. She has not asked us for any of her anxiety meds probably since about two or three weeks after that happened.

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**Michelle Tuite:** So, and I will tell you that when they're little like that it's almost easier to educate them. It's easier to partner with their teachers. Because when they're two and three, we expect those tantrums, we expect them to hit each other. And what I’ve learned is that every behavior is a form of communication. And so, in her little world, she was attempting to tell us she didn't feel right.

**Michelle Tuite:** I think that, for the most part, our teachers go into the educational field to teach to impart knowledge, to have a classroom that may just look very crickety and beautiful and set up in a certain way. And mental health can be sloppy, it can be sticky, it can be awkward. And I think that for many of our professionals, at least in the educational realm, they may not feel equipped to deal with the outliers in mental health. And that could be a parent who doesn't necessarily know how to articulate their concerns for their child, a child who due to fight flight or freeze may behave in a certain way, and the teacher now is concerned about 27 other children and what am I supposed to do. There's a whole lot of mandates and rulings and standards and pressures that we've put on classroom teachers. And it is imperative, as a community as a group of people that are focused on children, it is imperative that we put the resources and tools at their fingertips, that we provide them with people who are specially trained to talk to children, therapists, social workers, counselors.

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**Amy Welly:** I have so much appreciation and so much gratitude to these teachers and to these educators because they're doing a job that most of us can't do or most of us are not built to do. But you know, treat these kids like they were your kids. Establish the relationships with these kids like they were your kids because if you see your child struggling through this situation would you want to see another child struggling through this situation.

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**Christina Chalmers:** Initially, when we gained custody of the children, my husband and I did go in person to the school and sit down with the principal and the school psychologist and said here's the situation, here's where we're at, we need some support. So, we need some help and some direction as to, you know, what's going on with the kids here at school. I’m really engaged in what the kids are doing. I’m very open to communication. I’m, you know, I’ve met with all of their teachers the past couple years. They know they can email me; they can call me with any concerns, any behavioral concerns that they have, any academic concerns they have. And I also have reached out to them about things, behaviors that I’m seeing at home. or I’m seeing the work that they're bringing home, and I have concerns about it, you know.

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**Michelle Tuite:** I believe that our world as a whole has began to start the conversation of mental wellness, mental health, and attempting to reduce the stigma. And it's difficult that's really a very difficult conversation to have. Mental health, mental wellness doesn't suddenly go away. It doesn't cure itself you don’t get a certificate, people are human. And we might not always know the label or the circumstances, but our teachers certainly need those resources, and our kids need to be okay, we need to model those conversations for them, we need to set them up for success, we need to practice responses like we practice fire drills. When so and so hits you what are you going to do, how are you going to react, and so I think we're on an upward swing of being able to have those conversations they're so essential.

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**Thomas Capretta:** We appreciate this perspective. We agree communication is so imperative. For families listening, maybe you find yourself in a position where you are starting to understand what’s unfolding in your child’s life and you are not sure what to do. Michelle, Amy, and Christina want to share some helpful advice with you.

**Michelle Tuite:** The thing that helped us the most was counseling, whether it be family counseling, counseling for myself and my husband, counseling for my little. Being able to talk about it to kind of put it in compartments to be able to deal with it.

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**Christina Chalmers:** Two of my grandchildren are in, you know, some therapies like speech and occupational therapy. So, you know, that has to correspond with what they're doing at school, too. And then my oldest grandson, you know, is in some heavy counseling right now it’s a trauma focused counseling. So, you know, there's a lot going on there. So, it does take a lot of communication.

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**Michelle Tuite:** Every single conversation when you sit down and you go to talk about what's going on, it should be what's best for the child. And so, I’ve had family members, families, that have come to me, and I’ve said I’ve already talked to this person, and I’ve talked to this person, and I’ve talked to this person don't stop, don't stop. I think that when we look at our children, they've been given to us for a reason, and we are the advocate, many of us have walked in those shoes before we just didn't know what it was called. But we need to continue that conversation, because the stigma is real, we need to reduce that for our children. But their behavior again is a form of communication and if we don't hear them and put things in place to build them up and help them maneuver and navigate this world, then too often they believe that the pain is not worth it. And so, I have said it, I believe this, we need to bury the shame and the stigma and stop burying our children. And while that's difficult to hear sometimes it's more difficult to look that family in the eye. When they came to you and you weren't able to help them, I don't have all the answers, but I have resources, and so you just keep reaching out. Checking in making sure that they feel visible that they feel heard. And that they feel valued, and I think that and just being honest with them I’m so sorry that you're going through this. I don't have the answer right now but let's look to this person. And just be there for them. I know that we get busy in our lives, especially in the schools, I mean we get very busy we've got deadlines and mandates, but if you knew that by taking that moment that was going to change their life, wouldn’t you take it? Absolutely, yeah.

[Music]

**Amy Welly:** The biggest thing I can say is just pay attention to your kids because, like I said, with us, we started noticing attitude and personality changes. She wasn't being disrespectful but she just kind of she wasn't her perky self like, you know, like she was. It is a big deal, pay attention to these students. If you see a student that goes from being like happy or something and then, just all of a sudden, they're drawn in or like you're seeing fake smiles or they're just not acting the way that they would, talk to them. Talk to

them and try and figure out what's going on.

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**Christina Chalmers:** That's my recommendation, if your child's in any kind of counseling, please reach out to them, because they will help you. You know, talk to the school. So, she really, the two of us kind of, you know, pushing forward has at least got him on the 504. Once he was there, I pushed even further for him to get on the IEP. The school psychologist was kind of the hold up a little bit for us. She just said, well you know, he's doing really well in school, and I mean, and I wasn't seeing that, you know. No, he's not doing really well, you know, he's hurting himself, he's you know, his scores are low, like he's really struggling.

**Christina Chalmers:** Children sometimes get really good at masking their lack of understanding for their feelings or especially a child with low social emotional health. My grandson's social emotional health is about half of his age, right now, you know, that's really important to understand, because if he doesn't understand what's happening, he can't learn, you know, he cannot learn. So that's just as important, I think the social emotional health as the academics

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**Patrick Cunningham:** Hello, my name is Patrick Cunningham, but you can just call me Patrick. I am currently a student at Ohio State, I am pursuing my doctorate in counselor education. And my background is in school counseling. I worked as a school counselor for a number of years, both in the United States and overseas. I’m also currently working for the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center as a graduate research assistant at the moment, focusing mostly on helping to support partnerships between families and schools throughout Ohio around mental health.

**Patrick Cunningham:** Just as our physical health can change over the course of our lives, we go through various stages of life where we're feeling healthy and unhealthy, for various reasons. It's the same sort of thing with mental health. There are different levels of need and different levels of care associated with our levels of need regarding our mental health. This can change and fluctuate over the course of our life.

**Patrick Cunningham:** One thing that comes up a lot regarding mental health is trauma. So, trauma can come from many different things. Research has pointed to something called adverse childhood experiences as potential sources of trauma. And these include life events during childhood, such as exposure to violence, abuse, and neglect, or experiencing the death of a loved one, or exposure to drugs and alcohol addiction experiencing poverty, divorce, or separation of parents, just to name a few.

**Patrick Cunningham:** And so, one thing that's really important with trauma and one thing that makes it perhaps more difficult to understand than physical health is that trauma is really dependent on how it's experienced by each individual. So, everyone might experience something in a different way. And for that reason, it's really important for us to check in with kids about what they're going through and listen with empathy and understanding, being sure to recognize that they may be experiencing something in a little bit of a different way from the way that you might experience it.

**Patrick Cunningham:** Research has shown that positive experiences are just as important as adverse or traumatic experiences for children, these positive experiences help to protect kids against the impact of trauma. And some really important, positive experiences. That have been shown to be particularly impactful, and these are things that can be provided by families and schools include nurturing relationships with families. Also, teachers and other educators and peers also things like developing a sense of school belonging or a sense of belonging in the Community. Also, things like experiencing structure through teams and a sense of meaning through celebrations and traditions and rituals other various experiences. So, schools and families can work together to build in these positive experiences for their kids, and this would really help to reduce the impact of trauma.

**Patrick Cunningham:** And it's really also important to build open two-way communication between families and schools that encourage families to reach out if they have more specific concerns with their child's mental health and their emotional health. My advice for families is to start really just by normalizing mental health and having conversations at home that can encourage reflection on how kids are feeling. Often kids of all ages might have a really difficult time, identifying and naming emotions and that's something that's really important, you know, in order to process through an emotion effectively. We all really need to be able to recognize what it feels like in our bodies to identify it name it, and then we can kind of be able to process it and move forward.

**Patrick Cunningham:** It can really be supported at home and in school, so it takes time and practice to do this. Also, as adults it's important for us to talk about mental health with our kids because it's become a topic that's really prevalent in their world you know kids are talking about things like anxiety, depression, triggers, suicide, self-harm. And these conversations are happening on social media in person, online chats, or over texts. And this is not really, it's not meant to be a warning to scare you but really to emphasize the prevalence of these conversations, which as we know, when done in an arena that's, you know, not supervised, it might lead to some misinformation around these topics. In my experience as a school counselor, I’ve seen kids using these words incorrectly or in appropriately. And that can lead to some escalating emotions. So, really to kind of promote positive and informed conversations on these topics. Take the time to ask your kids about what they're hearing what they're talking about what their friends and what they think about topics around mental health. And then also, you know, encourage them to open up let you know what they're feeling but also really be sure to let them know that you love them no matter what, and no matter what they're feeling or no matter what they're thinking.

**Patrick Cunningham:** If the child in their care is experiencing mental health challenges, it can really sometimes feel like a reflection on their parenting, you know, oh gosh what have I done wrong, or you know what could I have done differently. There can be feelings of fear, feelings of anger, variety of emotions associated with that. So, it's important for families to seek support to process through their emotions. Just as it's important for kids to process through their emotions, you know talk with others about what you're experiencing, seek support from friends, family members, professionals. And this can go a really long way and increasing your capacity to successfully navigate these difficult experiences with your child around mental health while also, you know, helping to reduce the stigma that's associated with mental health.

**Patrick Cunningham:** You know, it's really important to view families as experts, especially expert experts of their own kids. So, really, you know, take the time to seek their perspective and expertise on their children. Seek active partnerships with families to support mental health and well-being.

Patrick Cunningham: Another thing that I would really recommend is trying to engage in trauma informed practices as a school, and this means approaching children and families in a way that is sensitive. To the trauma that they may have experienced, and trauma informed approaches really are universal, it's for all students so it's approaching students and their families, as if they may have experienced some kind of trauma throughout their life. And if you're engaging all students in all families in this way, they can really go a long way in helping out any of the kids or their families that have experienced trauma. And there's a lot of resources out there around trauma informed practices and specifically a school wide approach to trauma informed care goes a long way.

**Patrick Cunningham:** And last just want to emphasize the importance and kind of leading the way and normalizing conversations around mental health. It's really important for schools to be open about the importance of mental and emotional health and also to share who the primary contacts are for mental health in schools, you know. This often may be a school counselor, maybe another professional

Patrick Cunningham: But while schools are not the only members of the community that are responsible for mental health, you know. That may often come in partnership with, you know, counseling services in the Community. They do see kids day in and day out every day. And so, schools, do have dedicated mental health professionals within their buildings. So, it's important for families to know who those contacts are. And also, you know for schools to promote the mental health resources and supports that are in the communities so that families can access these supports directly. Thanks again so much for having me. Again, there's so much more that could be said, but I really do appreciate the time to have this conversation.

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**Fara Allen:** On behalf of the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement team, I’d like to thank all our wonderful guests on this episode.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Thanks for listening to Family-to-Family, please subscribe, rate, and review wherever you are listening today. Your feedback is welcome and appreciated. For more information and resources from the topics discussed in today’s show, please visit ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu forward slash podcast. Along with that web address our social media handles and email are in the show notes. Follow us on twitter @OhioEngage and on Facebook at Facebook.com/OhioSFEC. I’m Tom and that’s Fara and this has been Family-to-Family. Family-to-Family is a production of The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center in the Center on Education and Training for Employment at The Ohio State University.

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