Stephanie Christensen:

You've survived the 2:00 AM diaper changes, the turmoil of toddlerhood and the weekend warrior moments of shuttling your children to and from birthday parties and sports and performing arts practices. But no one prepared you for being a parent of a teenager.

Stephanie Christensen:

The teenage years are a bit like the infant years. This is a time of great physical, social, and intellectual growth. And knowing this can help parents understand the mood swings and the changes they are seeing in their preteen and teenage children.

Stephanie Christensen:

But when did the normal ups and downs of teenage life become something to worry about and seek help for? Here at Connect Canyons, we recently posed these questions and more to one of Canyon's district psychologists, Brandon Segura. He had some timely insight to share for families.

Stephanie Christensen:

This is Stephanie Christensen, and you're listening to Connect Canyons today. I have with me Brandon Segura. Why don't we start, Brandon, by you telling me a bit about yourself.

Brandon Segura:

I'm a school psychologist in Canyons School District. I've been here for, oh, I don't know if it's nine, ten years. Right around the time of the transition from Jordan. Got my degree, I have a PhD and I am licensed as well, I have my degree from the University of Utah and currently working in a middle school, but have also worked in elementary schools within our district. As far as private practice on the side, and I'm not necessarily promoting myself, but what I did there was predominantly evaluations and then working with more internalizing disorders. So anxiety, depression, things along those lines. Was doing private practice more heavily years past. I have two little kids, three total, but newest one five weeks old, so six weeks. So with that being the case, I've had to pull back from that, but I just enjoy working in the schools so much. That's where I'm mostly spending my time, even though I still do some on the side.

Stephanie Christensen:

Well, parenting is the topic of the day, which it sounds like you have plenty of experience with, so I'm sure you can empathize with families. And there are so many things, new things to deal with. And so many technologies that get in the way of communicating with our kids. So I really wanted to talk to you about adolescence and what is expected, what is normal teen angst versus something you should be more worried about as a parent? How do you know when your kids crossed over into an area where you need professional help?

Brandon Segura:

And that's a great question. As for what that line is, that's very, very challenging. I think you can look at a variety of things, for instance, if there's a family history of, and when I say internalizing disorders, what I mean by that is anxiety, depression, things along those lines. Some of those that we feel more internally, they can manifest outward behaviors as well, but they're kind of classified as these more internalizing disorders. But if there's a history of such within the family, obviously that might mean that they're more predisposed to experience that as well. I think a big thing as well is how much it's impacting them. So is it just something that's occurring every couple of weeks and it's not really lasting that long? Is it something that's occurring on a daily basis and is significantly impacting their functioning? Has there been a dramatic change in behavior?

Brandon Segura:

And then obviously some of those more significant symptoms that we'd want to be aware of, maybe more with depression and such. If there's significant change with, eating, sleeping, some of those patterns of behavior that may be less what they're telling you, but the signs or symptoms that you can see. And of course, if they're reporting that it's really bothering them and that's where it's, we look at what we can observe as well as what it is that they tell us. But if you're, I think if you're in doubt, seek out some help because worst case scenario, they might be like, oh no, this is something that's within the realm of normal. And if it's maybe your only kid or your oldest kid, or your only kid that's doing it, you may not have that reference point for how significant it is or is not.

Stephanie Christensen:

As a parent, you're going to seek help. Where do you go? What does the district offer as far as help with that? And how do I know what's a good fit?

Brandon Segura:

There can be some really great therapists I know that with certain clients it just doesn't mesh. I think we'd like to pretend or think in our mind that it's all, I'm trying to think of some of those... the therapists that you see in movies that have this like magic wand and they can just pull out all these...

Stephanie Christensen:

Darn, why don't they exist?

Brandon Segura:

...tricks that it's like, oh, I'm better. It's not always that way, but it is. I think it's finding the right fit. You can start with your school, they do have some things to offer depending on the level of need. So, as I mentioned I'm currently working in middle school, we have social workers in the middle of school. We have a psychologist, myself, well at the one I work in. And there's also school counselors.

Brandon Segura:

They offer a lot of resources that could be groups where it's dealing with stress, coping strategies, things along those lines that are maybe some lower level interventions or supports depending on the kids' need. And is it something that, oh, I'm transitioning from elementary to middle and first couple of weeks are challenging and I just need some extra supports or coping strategies to use, something like that could be a great fit. Now, if the behavior is more pervasive, it's being seen at home and at school, if it's more significantly impacting their life, you could reach out and get some recommendations from the school. Your neighbor, you'll ask for a name and they'll be, oh, this was a great therapist, they can do that. We're going to give a list or at least three recommendations typically, if not more, if you decide to go the private route and again, school has some support groups.

Brandon Segura:

They also have Canyons Family Center that can be sort of short term solution-focused family therapy you can call it. But let's say something that's more, long-term more in depth. You can start with your pediatrician, they might have some recommendations. You can start with your insurance, most insurance companies, if you go online and they'll have a website where they'll show you providers that are in network. I would recommend getting one that's within network, just because, and I know we often say cost doesn't matter, but at the same time...

Stephanie Christensen:

It matters.

Brandon Segura:

It matters. And you don't want to, find that right fit, all of a sudden it's out of network, you're spending, and then you're like, oh my gosh, and it's causing other conflict. Maybe your kid picks up on that. They feel like they're... You don't want those sorts of things to occur.

Brandon Segura:

I will say this just because a child or an adult, really we'll say a child or adolescent, really enjoyed the first meeting that doesn't always mean it's going to be successful though. Or just because they weren't, they were like, 'ah, that wasn't quite what I thought' that also doesn't mean... I would give it a few times. Now if your child is one who is like, I hated it, I didn't say anything... maybe start looking at other avenues. I would also find one that's nearby if possible, just because that can be more of a burden if it's like, oh, there's this really great therapist, but he lives 45 minutes away. Just the easier it is for you to find someone who's close by the more likely you'll stick with it for your sake and your child's sake.

Stephanie Christensen:

One of the things that is a marker that you always look for to see if kids are doing well, is if they're isolated. But now with the new frontiers of technology, it's very difficult to know. What do you suggest to parents in dealing with kids that are doing most of their socializing via technology?

Brandon Segura:

I think looking at, is it a problem... because a lot of people, even adults have this social support network via technology. And I could go off on this other rant about social media, but that's not what we're... But, so let's say it's more of those. Because it seems like there can be a difference between the social media where it's just going for likes or going for where there's not really this relation. And then there are some kids who they do have their online gaming and they're actually talking, there's more of a discussion back and forth. And I do see a difference there. At the same time they could both be a negative thing in someone's life depending on how it is they use that. Are they able to walk away from it? And is it this thing where, when they don't have it, it's causing negative emotion in their life? Then it's oh, let's really look at that.

Brandon Segura:

I think also the amount of time, this is a rarity, but if there's a kid that can get playing his video games, and then the parent says, 'Hey, it's time for dinner' and they're like 'okay!' and they turn it off-doesn't happen. But in the ideal world, if that were the case and they just said 'oh yeah let me finish this one level, I'm coming right now', and there wasn't this tantruming, arguing, or if there were other options like we're going to go do this activity as a family or something, and they say 'oh yeah, sure'. Again, this is ideal, because it doesn't seem like this is always the case.

Brandon Segura:

But if that's how it were, I wouldn't see that being really a problem, because there is this balance of okay, I have this other aspect, but I also have this. If when it's taken away there's a lot of arguing, and not just 'oh mom, come on', or when it's limited, then it does seem to raise more red flags. That doesn't necessarily mean it needs to be all stripped out and they need to be pushed out into mainstream society and be like, 'no you need to just go talk to everyone'. But I think it is more like, do we need to work on some other support systems or some other ways for them to have those interactions and looking at creating more of a balance?

Stephanie Christensen:

Well, it does seem like we have so much pressure to be perfect and our kids have so much pressure. So how do we help them to be achievers or to do their best, whatever their best is? Not on the scale of comparing to everybody else, but how do you help your kid achieve without pushing too far? I mean, I've heard people who pay for grades. I've heard some people are like, whoa, no, no, no. Or even down to chores, some people it's part of being a family team, other people it's well, here's a little kickback to make sure it happens.

Brandon Segura:

And that's a great question, one that can be highly debated. For instance, there's a psychologist, Alfie Kohn, I think is how you pronounce his name, who wrote a book, "Punished by Rewards". And a lot of his research was of this opinion that you should not use rewards. I'm not fully of that opinion. I do think that there can be a time where it's not the best approach. However, I think the use of the word 'rewards' should also be discussed. What can be rewarding for one person may not be what's rewarding for someone else and rewards are not always a tangible item. So it can be praise, it can be attention, even just something that they want to show something that they did. Just that paying attention to it, showing an interest can be rewarding to them.

Brandon Segura:

So if we're using that as a reward, do I think that that reward is spoiling? No, that's not. It's still rewarding to them, but it's not necessarily rewarding in the sense of here's your money for doing that or this. Is that always a bad though? I don't think so, to provide an outside incentive because ideally we want them intrinsically motivated. We'd love them to want to do it because they know that it makes them feel better when they make their bed. It makes them feel like they're keeping their room clean and they're responsible. But is that really how it comes about? No.

Stephanie Christensen:

So how do you walk that balance of meeting your kid where they're at?

Brandon Segura:

Oh, now that's a great question. For one, I think it really depends on your relationship with them and what kind of relationship you have. Hopefully communication goes both ways with that. I think letting them know for instance, you'd like them to have these higher expectations, but not making them feel like you care for them less because this didn't occur, if that makes sense. It's like, the behavior is this way, how much I care for you, how much I love you, that doesn't change with this other expectation that may be there. But rather it's letting them know maybe why it is you'd like that, sort of that motivation behind. Okay, why is it you really want me to be a higher achiever? What is it about it?

Stephanie Christensen:

Is there one thing that you'd want all parents to know?

Brandon Segura:

Yeah, there are a variety of things. I think that it's okay to feel emotion, negative emotion as well. We don't always need to save them from it. It doesn't mean we don't acknowledge it or that we just leave them to their own vices, but it's okay to experience that. And we don't always have to save them right away. Now, of course we'd hope that they would have some coping. We would want to work with them on some of those strategies, but that's an okay thing. I think also, so this is kind of saying two things I guess, but really listening to your kids. And I know that we hear that all the time, but really give them a chance to be heard. And a lot of them just want to be heard and they don't always want a solution. Sometimes they just want to be heard.

Stephanie Christensen:

What do you wish teens knew?

Brandon Segura:

I wish that they knew how much their parents truly love them and how they want what's best for them, even though it may be hard for them to see. I think if they had that understanding, then sometimes decisions that, and I'm not saying that teens don't realize we love them, but I think if they knew that a lot of times we're coming from this approach of, this is what I think is best for you, and not just because we're trying to be mean, or we don't want them to have fun. If they really understood that, I think that would help with some of those difficult interactions that parents and teens have. It's surprising. So if we get a report of self harm or suicide, we'll talk to parents about it, let them know, this is, the schools will do that.

Brandon Segura:

And it never ceases to surprise me that sometimes when I let the kids know we're going to talk to your parent about this, they get really embarrassed or upset. Not always, but oftentimes, and what some of them have reported is I think that my parent is going to be mad at me, and that just never ceases to shock me, I guess. Because I know that when I express that to the parents they're like, 'why would they... why would they think that?' And I think that maybe the parent gets upset, not upset at their kid for feeling that, but just overwhelmed with, oh my gosh, this is going on. And there's a negative emotion involved. And the kid thinks that they're upset at them or don't realize that no, your parents want what's best for you. And they, if anything, when they hear that, it's like, oh man, what can we do? I don't, I don't want you to feel that way, but for a kid to think that I think it's heartbreaking.

Stephanie Christensen:

Yeah. I'm sure that you see a lot of heartbreaking things and a lot of things through your day with working with kids...

Brandon Segura:

And joyous things too, though.

Stephanie Christensen:

... And joyous things. Is there anything you'd want to say to parents out there about seeking help?

Brandon Segura:

I mean, I would say there's nothing wrong with erring on the side of caution. So if you are concerned, reach out and see, and I think that's better than either ignoring or not dealing with it. And then it becomes a more significant issue.

Stephanie Christensen:

Okay. Thank you again, Brandon, for talking to us today about raising teenagers.

Stephanie Christensen:

You've been listening to Connect Canyons. If you have further story ideas, drop us a line.