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You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

Today, we are talking about navigating difficult conversations with Heather Crabtree, who serves as a primary care psychologist for children, adolescents, and families, and is a supervisor for post-doctoral trainees. Please join us in understanding how to navigate different aspects of difficult conversations.

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Hello there, I'm Heather Crabtree and I'm a psychologist who works primarily with children, adolescents, and their families. In my work with clients and families, I often partner with schools and I also hear a lot from my clients about the impact that school personnel have on their lives. This is such an important and valued contribution to these children's lives and society as a whole. By listening to this podcast, it is obvious how much you care about your students and that you want to continue to develop your understanding and skills. Thank you for all you do, I hope this will be helpful to you.

Today we will be talking about navigating difficult conversations. I really like this topic because I think it is so applicable to everyone. No matter what we are doing, whether it is in our personal or professional lives, there are going to be difficult conversations that come up. Within this topic there are many different things that can be discussed, so I would like to try to make this as useful as possible.

First we will talk about how to prepare for a difficult conversation and that will include what type of mindset may work best going into the conversation as well as the logistics of actually having the conversation. And then finally at the end will talk about how to we care for ourselves after having these types of conversations. These situations can be emotionally taxing so caring for ourselves afterwards will be an important factor as well.

[The Harvard Family Research Project](#) affirms what all educators know to be true which is an engaged family is important for student success. This project has shown that a family involved in their child's education "can lead to positive benefits such as increased school attendance, higher academic performance, and improved attitudes about school." That being said, we definitely understand the importance of engaging family in the work we do. Now of course, at times, this is easier said than done, especially with some parents. Right? If I asked you to think about difficult conversations you've had throughout the years, those with parents probably pop into your mind, right? So there are different types of parents and personalities that can make things more tricky and difficult to handle.

I do not really think it is necessarily useful to go through and categorize different types of parents like the "lawnmower" parent or that sort of thing. So instead what I'd like to do is go through how to prepare for these types of conversations, as I think that will be much more useful in your day-to-day practice. If you are more interested in learning more about identifying the different types of personalities in parents, it is definitely widespread online, so feel free to look that up as well.

- **Preparation is key.** Be prepared for the unexpected, as parents may need to bring children to the meeting, so have materials that they can use in the room to minimize distractions. Having water and snacks available can be a kind and welcoming gesture as well. Be sure to have visuals available and organized, such as any student work or records that may be applicable to the meeting. When discussing academics, having visuals printed and prepared can assist parents in better conceptualizing the learning process and how it relates to their child. Finally, prepare yourself emotionally and mentally. We know that being in the right mindset or head space is really important for coming into a difficult conversation. This helps us approach the conversation with an open mind as well as present ourselves as confident which is an important aspect in this sort of situation. One really important aspect to achieving this is our self-statements- the things that we tell ourselves in our mind. This can really vary depending on what works for you but I can give you a few examples. They can be more general thoughts such as "I am prepared" "I am doing this in the best interest of my student" "I will keep an open mind", or more specific thoughts such as "I know this parent and I know they just want the best for their child" or "I will remind myself that Billy has many strengths as well". As always remember to breathe, know that you are prepared and that you can always ask for a break or to reschedule for a different time if you feel as though you are becoming overwhelmed or it is not going very well. Sometimes people find it useful to have something to drink or sip on (like water, coffee, or tea) as they are talking just to have that moment to pause or have something in their hands so that something to consider as well.
- **Set the tone early.** We understand that starting off a meeting with positive comments about their child is needed, though be aware that our body language will send parents the first message. Also, do not overlook the basics: use eye contact, thank them for joining you, and use a firm handshake. It's crucial that together you identify a common goal for the student that both you and the parents agree upon. This common goal should be referred to throughout the meeting to maintain a focused conversation. For example, "I know we both want Jackson to be a person who works well with others. Let's focus this meeting on how he can grow in this area this year." Finally, you can help to set the tone for the conversation by creating a general agenda for the meeting and sharing this with the parents. This structure can ease parents knowing there will be no surprises.
- **Be issue-focused.** Offer parents the option if they would like to share first or if they would like you to. Be sure to let them know you will be taking notes to ensure that you understand their concerns and thoughts. It can be easy to come to the table intent on just sharing what we know to be true about the student. However, we need to strive to listen openly and without judgment. This is easier said than done. Be deliberate in using "we" often, which emphasizes that this is a collective team effort. Parents may want to talk about other students and how they impact the issue; kindly but firmly redirect the conversation to their child. Feel free to remind them that you don't talk about their child to other parents. At any time that the meeting seems to deviate from the original purpose, return to that common goal that was originally identified.
- **Our words matter.** Remember to begin with at least one specific compliment about the student. During the meeting, use affirmative words that identify to the parents what the student is doing, rather than what they're not doing. Be sure to separate and speak about the student's behavior, not the student as an individual. Refrain from using sarcasm, educational jargon, and absolutes (he always...she never...).

When sharing information, be specific. Here are a few examples:

- Today during math, I noticed that Suzie really struggled with staying focused. In the moment, we handled it by taking a movement break.
- Recently, I've noticed that in class, John is shutting down when things get challenging. I've been trying some strategies to provide extra support. They include xxx.
- I've observed a change in Thomas's progress in the past 3 weeks. He was completing math assignments independently and now he is not finishing assignments during class work time.

Also make sure to ask for input from the parent/other person, but asking questions such as:

- Is this something you've noticed at home, too?
- Have you and your child talked about this? Are you comfortable sharing with me how [student] described the situation?
- Is there anything else you've observed at home that you think may be related?
- Has [student] had this challenge in the past? Can you share what has helped?

Parents or loved ones may already have potential solutions, so be sure to ask for their help with questions like:

- What are your thoughts on the situation?
 - Are there things you do at home that might work at school?
 - Are there things that you know won't go over well that I should avoid?
 - Is there a teacher who knows/works well with your child that you'd suggest I talk to?
- **Conclude with resolution.** To ensure clarity, explain back to the parents their thoughts/concerns in your own words. You can also have the parents share what they've heard your thoughts/concerns to be as well. Be sure to set several measurable and attainable short-term goals. Collectively decide when and how progress towards the goals will be shared. End the meeting just as you started, with a specific compliment, positive body language, and a firm handshake or a nice wave.

So that's kind of how to do the conversation, so let's talk about what to do after the conversation. First of all, take time for yourself- Breathe! Review the conversation- what went well? What did you learn? What could you do better next time? Is there anything you need to follow up on? Keep a written record so you remember what happened and what should occur next for follow-up.

It can be helpful to send a follow-up email and recap what was said – helps to keep everyone on the same page and make sure there were no misunderstandings. Also helps you to process the information and keep a record of the meeting.

It can be helpful to find someone to debrief with- a coworker, spouse, or friend. Or try just writing down your thoughts and feelings.

Finally, it can be really helpful to get physical! Let endorphins flood your body and clear your mind from the conversation. A brisk walk can help, or a full workout, whatever works for you.

All right, thank you so much for sticking with me through this conversation about conversations. Let's go through three main points that I think would be helpful to take away from this podcast:

1. Difficult conversations are sometimes necessary and can lead to productive outcomes, especially when you are well prepared.
2. Having the right mindset is key- stay calm and stay confident and remind yourself that you can take a break or postpone the conversation if it is not going well. Remember to be clear, use specific examples, listen, and collaboratively develop a plan for moving forward.
3. Take care of yourself after a difficult conversation by debriefing with someone you trust, taking a few minutes to yourself, doing a preferred activity, or engaging in physical activity. You got this!

Thanks so much for your time today! I hope this has been helpful.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes

covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!