

Dr. Nancy Rappaport discusses strategies for parenting during the pandemic

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello, and welcome to Big and Little, a new podcast from Boston Children's Museum.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

OLIVIA (PRODUCER): In today's episode, we're exploring some of the questions many parents, caregivers, and educators are grappling with in the midst of the pandemic. How can we take care of ourselves and our kids? What can and can't we control during this time? What positives can we take away from this?

Museum CEO and President Carole Charnow discusses these questions and more with Dr. Nancy Rappaport, associate professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Carole will tell you more about Nancy's extensive list of credentials. Let's dive in.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Big and Little podcast from Boston Children's Museum. Today, we have Dr. Nancy Rappaport with us. Nancy is an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and has worked with educators for 23 years.

Her newest book is very relevant to teachers and parents. It's called the Behavior Code-- a Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students. Nancy grew up in West Roxbury and visited Boston Children's Museum as a child and also brought her own children to the museum. So it's such a pleasure to have you here with us today, Nancy. Thank you.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Delighted to be here.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I've been listening to your webinars that you're offering during the pandemic, and I found them very inspiring and also comforting. It's such a difficult time. First of all, how are you? And how is your family?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Thank you for asking. I'm adjusting. I think, for all of us, it's a major challenge to adapt to a shelter in place. I've been seeing patients by telephone.

My daughter was in Bellevue and was working on the medical floors when the COVID pandemic was at its peak there. But she's fine. Now she did come visit us for six weeks. She's 30 now.

And there are all these hidden aspects of the pandemic that are actually little jewels. It was stressful for us to have her on the front lines as a psychiatrist practicing medicine as an intern, but we also had a delicious six weeks when she was practicing telepsychiatry from our home. So I think that's a lot of what we'll be hearing about today is yes and it can be very scary times. And we also end up having situations that are bringing our families closer and creating ingenuity about how we navigate this time.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I'm so glad that she's well and that you're all well. So you started hinting into a little bit about what you're thinking about navigating this time. And I know one of the things you deal with in your webinars and in your practice is the struggle that parents and caregivers and teachers are having with having their kids at home.

They may be teaching and also looking after their own children. They're homeschooling. They're working at the same time. And also some people have simply lost their jobs.

They're facing significant financial challenges or they're working on the front lines. So we know that a lot of people are very overwhelmed. And I just was very interested to have our listeners hear your thoughts about that and how you would advise people to get through this time.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: So the first aspect that I would say to parents is take care of themselves, because if they're able to figure out what they control and what they don't control, that's what's going to give them the most availability to their children. So for example, being realistic about what you can and can't control. We cannot control how others follow the rules of social distancing. We can't control predicting what will happen. We can't control how long this will last or even the amount of toilet paper at the store.

But we can control our positive attitude, whether we choose as a family to follow CDC recommendations or our own physical distancing. And probably here, one of the things I would highlight is for parents to really monitor how much they're watching the news and limiting the amount of time that they're watching it. Because even if we have young toddlers and we think we're just, I mean, really it's like an adrenaline fix right now.

We just are so hungry for information. And there's so much contradiction coming out at all times. So we might think, oh, we're going to sneak in an hour while we're prepping for dinner some form of media that's information about this pandemic and our kids are absorbing it by osmosis. And what they're absorbing is the level of our fear.

So we have to get a grip on our fear. And you doing this podcast today Carole is one small step that we're going to take together with your parents, with your educators to say, what can we control? And what can't we control? And how can we take care of ourselves?

CAROLE CHARNOW: That just makes so much sense to me. And I think when you talk about the children picking this up from us, I know that parents are very concerned about their children's fears. And that is also a great source of stress. There's been some controversy about this idea of children building up resilience, and then some people say it's too much resilience. So can you talk a bit about how our kids are coping and maybe allay some of parents fears about how their kids are going to come out the other end of this.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: It's a great question. But we are living in a world of fear. And certainly the fear moves from the pandemic and whether we're all going to get COVID and die, which is, of course, very concerning. And we're doing every effort with social distancing and washing our hands and following Governor Baker's recommendations to manage that.

And then another aspect that's haunting many parents is what's happening with our kids in the context of their schooling and their extracurricular activities. And I had one parent joke with me and said, "I feel like I'm the executive administrator to my kid." Like, it's 10 o'clock and you need to be doing your math class. And there's certainly been pieces written about how challenged some of us are as being homeschool teachers because we never really did master or some of the things that we're being asked to think about with our kids.

But I would really ask your parents to step back and realize that we are going through an historical time right now. And this historical time means that our kids when they're hopefully 100 or 70, people are going to say tell us about the pandemic of 2020. So that's what our kids are learning right now.

They're learning how are we managing with a complete upheaval in our life. And as you said, some people I'm tragically sorry that they may be out of a job, they may be physically challenged, they may be food challenged. And then there's another cohort of parents who, and I hope I'm not insulting any of you

guys, but really have been-- you parents are going to send me the respect and affection. I've been a child psychiatrist for 20 years.

But we've sort of been helicopter parents or snowplow parents. And we've tried to position our kids so they will be masters of the universe. And my hope for this generation that's being confronted with a change in schooling is that there's going to be an unbelievable tapping into creativity. And that by honoring the way kids learn, play, dress up, alone time, cooking, talking with their families, doing activities on the Children's Museum that we're going to discover that some of the micromanagement, some of the inordinate high expectations we've had for performance that our kids, when we lift that up that it's a little bit like the Grinch Stole Christmas moment.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That's incredible because I know that even prior to this pandemic, one of the things we were really concerned about is the increased testing at school and the lack of recess at school and the increased stress the children were having, increasing mental health issues with young children. So it's interesting for you to say that this could have a major impact on the direction of that, which could be positive.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: We could have unintended positive consequences. I think in thinking about resilience, you have to hunt for the good and hone in on it. And I did a webinar for NursePartners for use on Friday. And I had 700 educators.

And I asked them to put into the chat box the kinds of things that they were doing to contribute, give back. And that's the single most important aspect of resiliency in kids is what Robert Brooks likes to call contributory activities. And I like to think of as giving back.

And the range of things that, which is why I love educators that they had championed to show care to their communities was so touching. They talked about leaving hand sanitizer in the mailbox, buying Dunkin' Donuts certificates for the grocery people. They talked about giving money to food banks. And I think that's something also that parents can do with their kids right now is do inventory with them. What kinds of good deeds do they want to do in this time that aren't just check the box but are meaningful?

CAROLE CHARNOW: One of the things we talk about, one of the founding principles of Boston Children's Museum was to make better citizens. So to empower children to contribute the social fabric of our communities. And it sounds to me like what you're saying is that this could potentially bring out that urge in all children to help and to heal and to take care of, which is something that very young children demonstrate on their pets.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: I love that. I love that, Carole. It's the concept of a book *The Spiritual Child* that we start out thinking of a higher meaning in our lives and it gets whittled away.

And it's also the idea, again, I would encourage your guardians and parents and teachers is this can be an opportunity for kids to identify with a caring adult sort of the categories they value. So I can throw it out, just it sounds a little bit like a shopping cart list, but things like good deeds, how they want to be in the family, how they want to contribute to each other, what they're going to do in taking care of the house, what's creative for them, how are they going to manage finances, not burdening them if they're unemployed, but thinking about if they do need to tighten up, how that's going to happen. Thinking about this as an opportunity to build passion.

They may have a skill like building that they get a chance to do. And then helping kids think about self-care like meditation and eating right. And then lastly, thinking about their spiritual life. So we can

potentially allow this to deepen the dialogue and families and then bring that wisdom when this pandemic finally ends.

CAROLE CHARNOW: One of the things about your book *The Behavior Code* is you talk a lot about challenges that some kids have, whether it's behavioral challenges or learning disabilities and so on. How do parents who have a child at home who may have challenging behavior or significant learning differences that they are having a hard time coping with, how can we help them to get through this difficult time with this additional burden that they have?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: That's the million-dollar question.

[LAUGHTER]

CAROLE CHARNOW: Personally, I'd like to know.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: So I think first of all, with any kid, we want to validate their questions and their worries and especially when they express emotions and challenging rage. So *The Behavior Code* was really written for teachers and parents as an accessible way if they had children with anxiety or oppositional behavior, withdrawing behavior or sexualized behavior sort of how to advocate for their kids within the school system. And it was also an effort to get to teachers practical strategies.

So one of the things that I did was to talk about central tenets that inform how we understand behavior.

And one that may seem sort of obvious, but it's also not always culturally translated is the idea that behavior is communication. So that means stepping back, and when your kid does a really provocative thing, trying to be a detective and trying to understand what is this child trying to communicate to me.

So let's take for an example, I had a grandfather that was perplexed. He had this super smart kid. And she was reading at like a college-grade level. And she was refusing to learn fractions. There was no way that she was going to understand $\frac{3}{4}$ is more than $\frac{2}{3}$.

But if you took it with the lens that behavior is communication, then you could think maybe she's not being stubborn. She's not being obstinate just to be obstinate. She's telling us that my life has had an incalculable loss, and I have no interest in learning about more than or less than.

And what sometimes parents worry about it, if they validate that feeling, are they somehow then excusing the behavior and letting their kid off the hook? And I say, no, you're not at all. What you're doing is by validating that they have a right to have whatever feeling it is, then you're validating the feelings but not the behavior.

So you could say something like, yeah, it sucks you don't have little league practice and you're not able to visit your friends as much as you like. And that's really got to seem like it's an incalculable loss. And then once you let them know that you validated it, then you move in with and you know what, we're going to figure out these fractions because that's what we have to do today.

And the other thing that I would say is that anger never travels alone, because that's really the emotion that usually trips up a parent. Me having been a parent of three kids, I can value that. My daughter used to say to me, "Who's an adult in this relationship?"

[LAUGHTER]

And I think it was me on a good day. But I think the idea that anger doesn't travel alone means when you have a really angry kid, trying to think about, are they exhausted? Are they feeling guilty?

Are they feeling attacked? Are they feeling rejected? Are they feeling hurt,

Worried, offended? And trying to make an alignment with those underlying feelings can really move the opposition behavior ahead.

CAROLE CHARNOW: It sounds like in a way, you're also saying for the parents to give themselves a break. They may have such high expectations of what they can manage to get a child like that to do under these circumstances, and maybe they need to adjust their own expectations about what they can accomplish.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Yes, I would especially highlight that around the virtual learning schedule because it's not the same as a traditional school schedule. And we have virtual learning ostensibly happening to the end of June. And the reality is that for elementary school, one to two hours a day of virtual learning is the expectation of having a child be able to be engaged. And that's what's optimal virtual learning. If you pile on that a child who has attentional difficulties or a learning disorder, you're going to cut that down. A middle school is two to three hours a day. And many schools I'm hearing have sometimes four to five hours a day. And high school is three to four hours a day. So the other thing I would strongly encourage your listeners is if your children are doing two to three to four hours a day of virtual learning, figure out a way to get them outside for at least an hour.

And some parents unfortunately and educators are telling me that they're frightened to let their children outside. And that's very understandable if you're in a high-crime neighborhood that that would be worrisome and that there may have been alternatives for after-school programs that are closed, for museums that are not open at this time. But I would still encourage being creative even if it means stepping outside if you have a porch, safely stepping outside but doing something that allows for activity. I was just looking at a YouTube that was a grandfather seat doing jump rope so they could get lots of Indian elderly people to jump rope. Making sure we move and get some counterpoint to the enormous amount of time that all of us are spending on electronic computers and Zooming and it's really important.

CAROLE CHARNOW: One thing that I learned from one of your webinars, you talk about these difficult tests that human beings have, threats, unpredictability, the unknown, and lack of control which now we have all at the same time. And it's very traumatic. And in thinking about the jump rope recommendation you just gave, I just thought about this unbridled joy of just doing something fun or releasing of your tension. And you do talk about joy. And how have you seen that families are able to keep joy alive during this tough time when they have so many challenges?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: I love that question. Well, I love that question, and I'm also cautious with it because I remember reading something in one of our local newspapers about all the incredible activities that these families were doing together. They were taking cooking classes and learning how to sharpen knives and weeding their garden and adding in a vegetable garden.

And I don't want to shift it so that somehow if you're making small efforts to maintain your family that if you're not-- I don't want to turn it into a competition of joy because we so often do that. Once we latch on to something is we-- but I think it's just to say to recognize that we are at a time when there are silly stressors that we have. The idea right now that we have-- the places we navigate right now are from the refrigerator to the computer, to the bathroom. So if joy means going out with your kid and making a sign on the sidewalk that helps uplift another person's spirit or taking some rocks and planting something in an elderly person's house, I mean, these can be joyous aspects of how we approach a very challenging time.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I hear what you're saying. You don't want now this to become another sort of thing we're worried about is, does my child have enough joy?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: And we are so good at turning things into competition. Really I'm trying to support just being compassionate to ourselves. I really encourage families to have check ins. And some people are really, again, some people are really ambitious. They do it every day.

I haven't done that. But just coming together and saying, coming up with, what would be helpful for us to talk about? What do you wish was different? And are you getting the support you need? And are you setting the boundaries you need?

So maybe some of your parents have more kids that are from say 3 to 12-year-olds. But for teenagers and young adults that have been thrown back into the family 24/7, boundaries are really important for them. They need to be allowed to go into their room and zone out and not have that become a national crisis.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I mean, I know one way that teens are really connecting with their friends right now is through video games. And I'm sure a lot of parents are having anxiety about that because they're spending much more time on screens. But then that's the way they're socializing with their friends.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Yep. So setting a careful balance of that. I mean, there are a fair amount of sleep disturbances that are happening right now where because there is not as much structure as there was and not as many demands some kids are really zoning out and spending hours and hours watching, including parents too but watching reruns and Netflix. And we want to keep coming back to the idea of balance and communication.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I know you keep a close eye on all kids and how this is affecting them. And of course, we know that the crisis has really hit minority communities and families that already have had suffered many inequities. And I guess I was wondering if it were up to you and you had the bully pulpit, what would you feel you would want to see change in our society, in our health care system, for example in our housing situation that really could make a difference in children's lives and impact them in a much more positive way? I mean, how can we rebuild in a better way after the crisis?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: I love that question. Well, before we spoke today this morning, I had the privilege of talking to 40 Latino pastors from all over the state through the ALPFA organization, which is a wonderful organization that does advocacy work for Latino communities. And one of the things that, of course, is heartbreaking is that there's food deprivation happening right now. And we have to figure that out.

We can't have children being hungry, and we've taken away the safety net of schools and the programs that they have for feeding our children. That safety net needs to be enhanced. There is right now we are saying that housing will be protected, but you can't be evicted currently. But the idea of securing housing for vulnerable families so that we don't have homeless families is incredibly important.

And then this isn't just for poor families. But one of the other challenges for shelter in place is you can have parents or guardians that start to get really tense with each other and start to go after each other. Moderate tension can be debilitating to kids.

And we see it in the data that that's one of-- it's as bad as physical aggression towards kids is co-parents being mean to each other and belittling each other. So another plea I would say is as challenging as the pandemic can be, if we can remain kind to each other, that will really help across the board for our children. Our kids are looking to us.

They're looking to us for our nonverbal cues. They're looking to us for our faith. They're looking for help with around the structure.

They're looking to us with how we balance and think about the fear. And this isn't to burden you with high expectations. But it is to say, we have a responsibility to our children.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I don't want to keep you forever, although I feel we could talk for another three hours. But I wanted to pose you this question. When you say a year goes by, and hopefully we have a vaccine and maybe not too much longer than a year, and what is the story that you feel we will have told during this time? What is your aspiration for the right story that we will tell about how we got through this historic challenge in our lives?

NANCY RAPPAPORT: I hope it's the Grinch Stole Christmas moment, that we took away things that we thought were integral to us being human. And we took away extracurricular activities. We took away being able to be present in our churches and our mosques and our synagogues.

We took away being able to go to the museums. And yet, we have a fierce tenacity to stay connected. And that's what I want our story to be that we care deeply about each other, we hold on to hope, we keep ourselves safe, we stay connected, and we have a sense of agency.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Well, I'll take those last words with me as I navigate my own path through this. And so many of the listeners are going to be so grateful for your inspiring words and all the things you've shared with us in this last half hour. Nancy, thank you so much for all you're doing for so many.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Well, it's an honor to be asked to speak with you and happy to hopefully share some insight that can strengthen people's resolve.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Thank you. I know you will have all the very best to you. Bye for now.

NANCY RAPPAPORT: Thank you. Bye for now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Thanks for listening. That's it for Big and Little. To hear more from Dr. Rappaport, be sure to check out her website, www.nancyrappaport.com to view her many webinars and learn more. We'll be back soon with another episode of Big and Little. So follow us wherever you get your podcasts. See you next time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]