



Parent & Faculty Education Conference
EMPOWERING OUR KIDS
Menlo School, February 6, 2016

Fireside Chat with Ross Szabo & Julie Lythcott-Haims

Moderated by Upper School Counselor Tracy Bianchi

Transcribed for PEC

Tracy Bianchi: We're starting off this portion of the program in a little different way. We've never done it before. We'll see how it goes, but it's through live polling. We have three questions that we are going to ask. A lot of those have come from the questions that you did through the registration, so we really look through all of those and try to create similar themes.

Each one of you should know that your responses are anonymous. The themes are really going to help Julie and Ross to be able to engage just more specifically about what we're seeing with our kids and our specifics. They'll be able to see things on how you're answering those questions, which will help dramatically,

We'll take a minute for you to continue to work on that process with your phones, so we'll take about a minute pause, have you collect yourselves with that, get the focus going, and then we'll start the polling. At that point, I'll read the questions for you, and they'll also be on the screen, so you can vote. As you're continuing to do that, we're going to start with question number one.

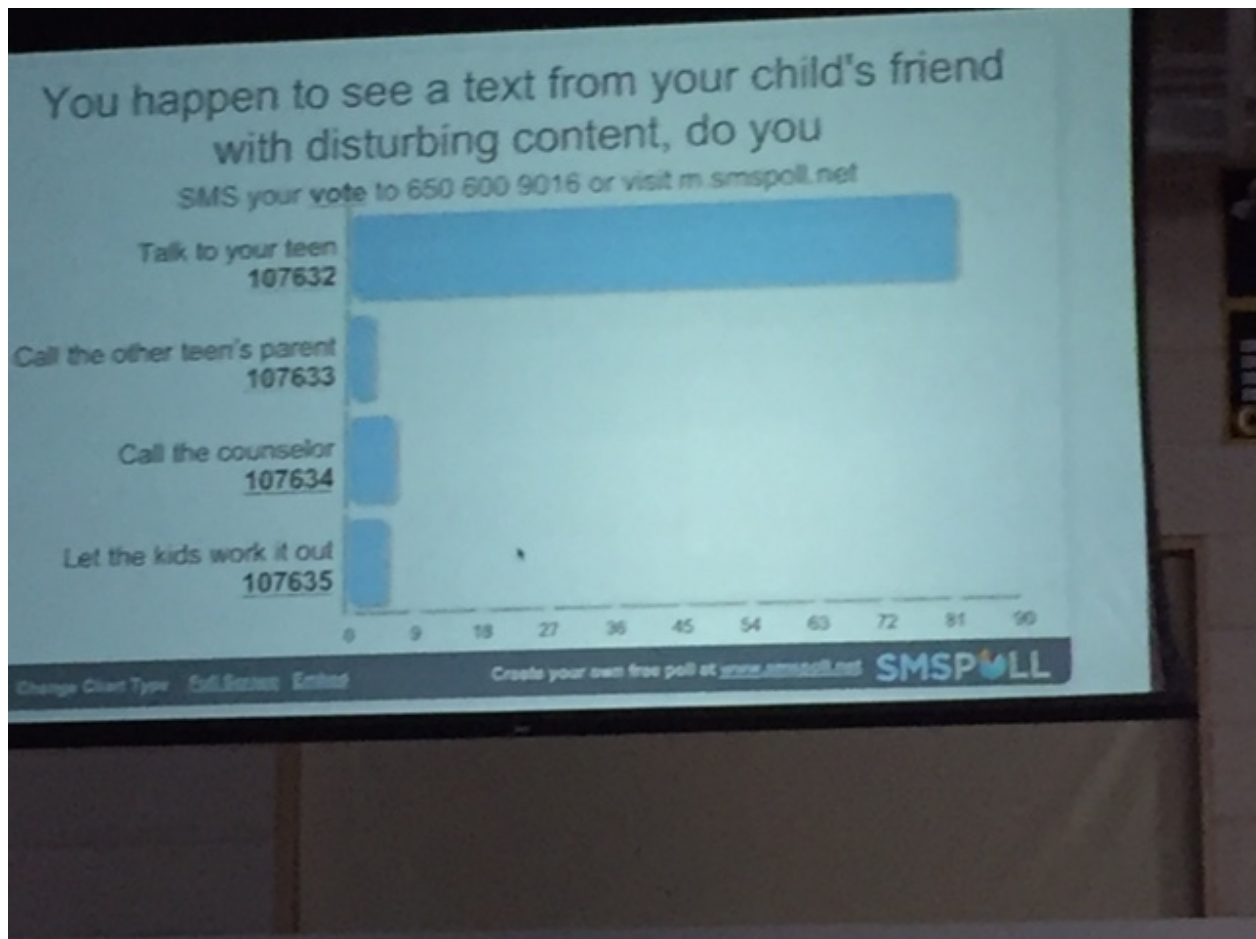
Live polling Question 1:

You happen to see a text from your child's friend with disturbing content. Do you:

1. Talk to your teen
2. Call the other teen's parent
3. Call the counselor
4. Let the kids work it out

Need Help? <mailto:support@rev.com>

Screen shot of audience live polling response



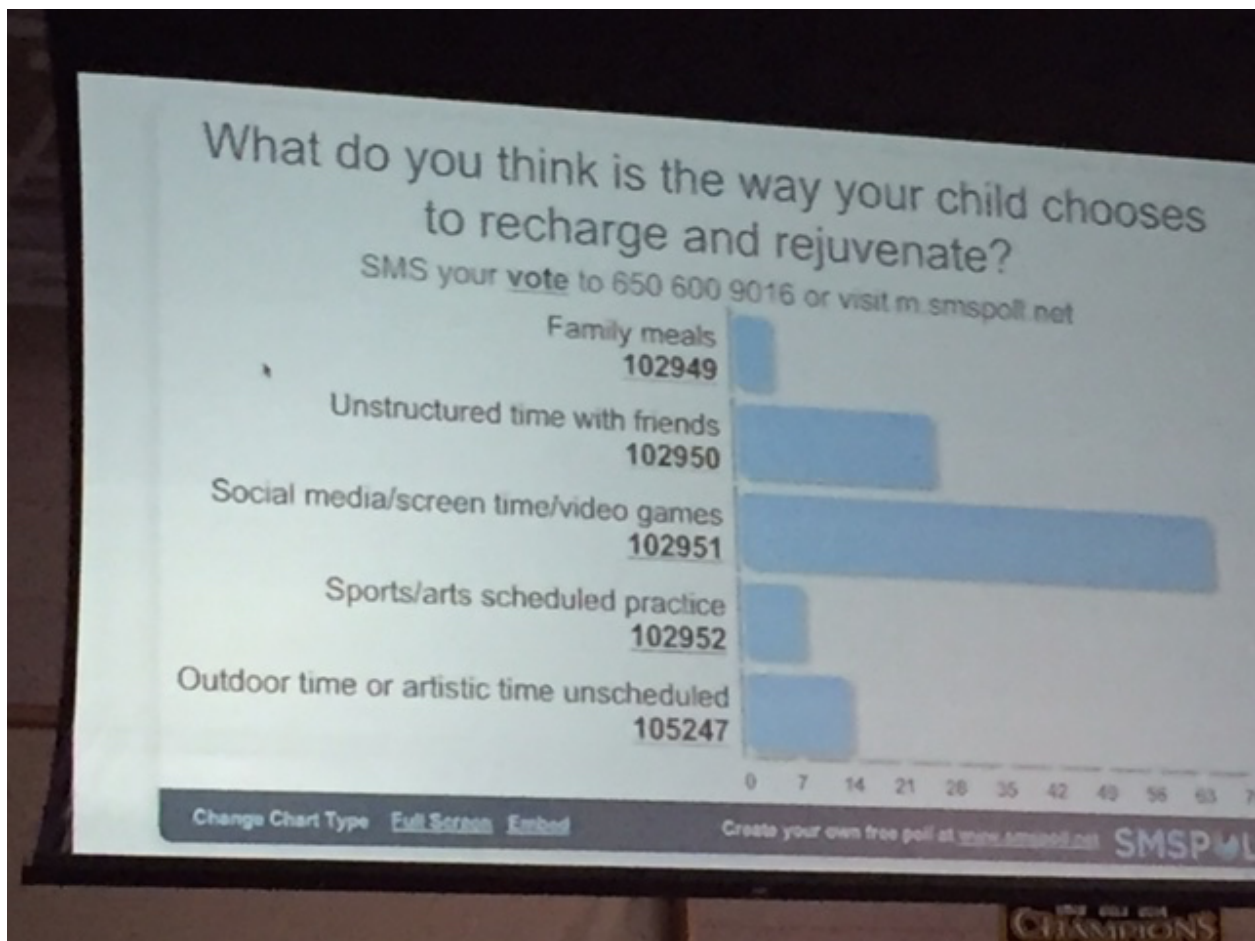
Tracy: We're going to move on to question number two. The majority of you obviously focused on talking directly to your teen first, and we're going to be talking more about that when the two of us, or the three of us in the fireside chat right now.

Live polling Question 2:

What do you think is the way your child chooses to recharge and rejuvenate?

- a. Family meals
- b. Unstructured time with friends
- c. Social media/screen time/video games
- d. Sports/arts scheduled practice
- e. Outdoor time or artistic time unscheduled

Screen shot of audience live polling response



Second question. What do you think is the way your child chooses to recharge and rejuvenate? Big difference here, between what you think and what you would want them to do. What do you think they would choose for rejuvenating or recharging?
Commenting on polling answers

Social media screen time, video games seems to take the trophy at that point. It's really helpful for you guys as the audience too to be able to see how your peers are answering this for their own kids, so what's happening in each home, you can see much more on the screen.

We're going to transition to the last question with the live polling.

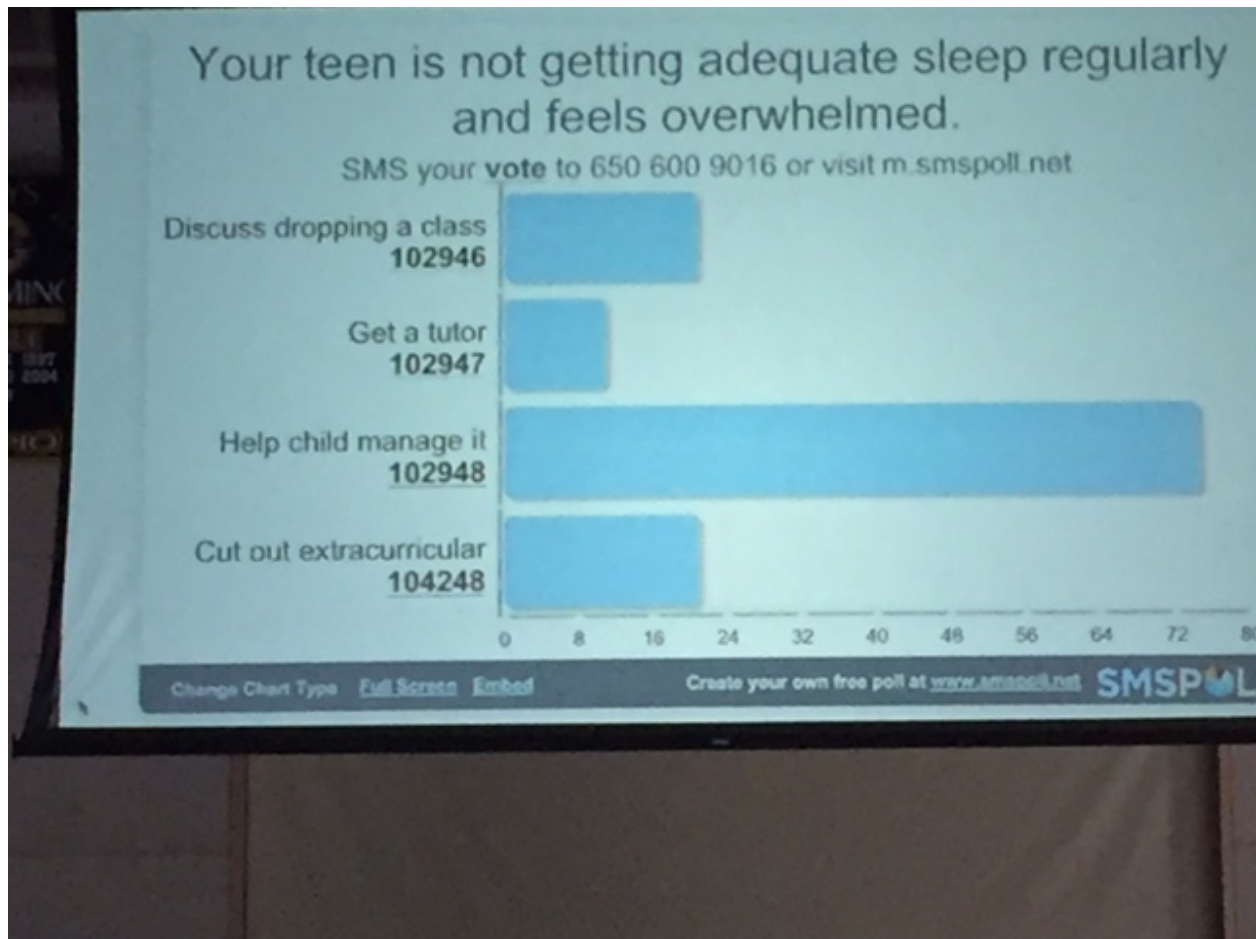
Live polling Question 3:

Your teen is not getting adequate sleep regularly and feels overwhelmed.

Do you

- a. Discuss dropping a class
- b. Get a tutor
- c. Help child manage it
- d. Cut out an extracurricular

Screen shot of audience live polling response



As you're all looking at those answers, we seem to have a majority moving to helping child manage the inadequate sleep. Thoughts are going towards extracurricular as well as dropping a class.

This is a way to help us actually get a pulse for the room, and how problems are managed, and how things are changed. What we're going to do now as we're looking through this is to move deeply into a lot of questions that you have had for Julie and for Ross. I'm going to read some of those. We're going to be talking just very casually but professionally, and giving lots of sound advice, and helpful tips, personal stories, experiences, and the reason that I'm up here in a way of moderating is also, for 6 through 12, for all of you from a counseling standpoint and having this grounded piece of the school to be able to scribe, or to talk through, directly what's happening here in this school, as well as what Julie and Ross are referring to. We'll have lots of different options around news there.

Audience question number one. We're going to start with the C-word that Julie is having a very hard time with sometimes when it's mentioned, which is college.

Question: To what degree are we holding missions ... They choose the word, "accountable" here ... For the negative effects of teen pressures? Talking a lot about suicide trends, of obtaining false ADD diagnosis, unhealthy levels of stress and depression.

I'd like both Julie and Ross to be able to think about that question and answer that more thoroughly. Something that comes to mind for me as we're talking about this with our own kids is, I really start to circle the word, "accountable," and I don't want this to be something where we're not able to take our own responsibility with a lot of what's happening in this college application process for our kids.

Even if you're looking sixth through eighth, or 9 through 12, we're talking a lot earlier in the morning about building this foundation of coping mechanisms, and how they learn to manage the stress of these kind of things. A piece I think that's really important in this process is to know that we don't have complete control over that, but how to teach our kids from an early age how to manage when they don't have control over something, that everything cannot always be something that is easy for them to obtain somehow, some way, so how to grasp that in different ways. That's a thought that comes to mind with this, is starting to build up foundations before rather than just focusing on a blame, but let's look on how to really help the kids to work with that.

Julie Lythcott-Haims: College. . Everywhere I go, the first, second, or third question from the audience is, "Aren't we just doing what we have to do to get our kids into the right colleges?" I like to interrogate both "right colleges" and "have to do." There's no question it's become almost the impossibly hard to get into the nation's schools that have the biggest brand names. I'm going to call them that, because there's no question of fantastic educations to be had at plenty of schools, but in communities like ours where we obsess mostly with the biggest brand names that are currently denying 90 to 95% of all applicants

admission when tens of thousands of the applicants have the grades and scores, accolades, awards, leadership, et cetera, in order to be in the running.

The schools didn't create that system intentionally. Over time, they were rewarding through admission the kids with the highest grades and scores, and every year, it was higher and higher. I think admissions people were incredulous for a while, like, "How is it possible kids in this class are somehow more 'accomplished' than the last?" By rewarding those additional APs, and those higher and higher GPAs. They were rewarding, essentially, the checklisted childhood and the mortgaging of childhood in exchange for a chance at admission.

Many of you have seen the report, "Turning the Tide." Came out two or three weeks ago from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, that says the college admission system essentially is broken and needs to be restructured so that we're not asking kids to mortgage their childhoods anymore. It was signed onto by 80 college admissions deans, and important people in college counseling, and I think in five years, we will have turned the tide. I think they'll stop asking kids to exchange their mental health and wellness for a set of activities, and grades, and scores, that demonstrate capacity to succeed in college. They're going to figure this out.

In the meantime, I don't know about you guys. I have kids to raise, and I can't wait five years for change. If the system's broken, I'd rather opt out of a broken system than decide I have to do these things in order to get my kid into those places. I alluded to this with my story about Sawyer (Julie's son) having to drop a class. I'm really clear that that might have consequences for his future. I actually think it had positive consequences for his future. His mental health and wellness matters so much more to me than the college name I get to put on a sticker on the back of my car. I'm more interested in the character development. I'm more interested in my kid being able to thrive wherever he goes, not being doubt riddled and breathless after living this childhood.

Yeah, the colleges, the big boys in college admissions, really need to reexamine, how can we assess hard work, achievement, effort, if someone's a lifelong learner, if they've got an intellectual vitality about them? They're figuring out how to reassess that, but in the meantime, we shouldn't let that broken system dictate how we raise our kids.

Audience: Do they think it's broken?

Julie: Do they think it's broken? Heck, yeah. If you go Google, "Turning the Tide," this report came out. It's two or three weeks old. Frank Bruni wrote about it in his New York Times column a couple weeks back, and you'll see through this beautiful language in that report about how crazy the college admissions academic arms race has become. I am hopeful. What I'm saying is, the change isn't coming tomorrow. It's certainly not change in time for our seniors. I doubt it's in time for our juniors. My Sawyer is a junior. My Avery is a freshman. Maybe by the time Avery's putting herself out there, they'll be signaling through the questions they ask that they're actually looking for a little bit healthier of a childhood, that you can be someone who sleeps, and who spends time

with friends, and works hard, and is considered smart and high achieving. That change is coming. It's just not coming quite fast enough for my eldest.

Ross Szabo: I think that's a really great answer. I don't want to add too much to it, because I think she addressed it, but I think what's really tough too is, colleges only have a limited amount of spaces, and the pool that has gotten larger of (those kids) trying to get into those limited amount of spaces is ... It (admissions numbers) keeps growing every year. Yeah. I do think the accountability word is important. I think working on coping skills to balance rejection is really important, too. One thing that I see a lot in some of the top private schools and even some of the top public schools is, when students are so afraid of that rejection, afraid of what it means for them and afraid of that failure. Teaching coping skills about how to address that (fear of failure) is also really helpful for any age in life.

Julie: The final thing I want to add is, this is where we really have to look in the mirror. Some of us, we look in the mirror, we see a big brand name school attached to ourselves, and we think that that's how a human leads a successful and meaningful life. "I have to have my kid go to one of those schools, and it'll be a meaningful and successful life." It's simply myopic view in our community right here, in Menlo Park, Atherton, Palo Alto, et cetera. The evidence is everywhere that people we respect and admire went to state schools, went to a small colleges no one has heard of, went to a community college first, started somewhere, flunked out of there, started up again somewhere else.

Yes, some among us went to the most elite schools. It is simply not the case that you must go to one of those big, brand name schools to be a success in life. Employers are starting to see that. They're saying things aligned with what Bill Deresiewicz wrote about in *Excellent Sheep*, which is that this march we put kids through in order to get into the biggest, brand name places might actually turn them into robots who are sheep-like. They jump through the hoops put in front of them, can't take the initiative to think for themselves, really think creatively, outside the box. Employers want people who had the humility that comes from not always having been the best, who knows when to step forward but also when to step back and let others step up.

The more employers start to see that, like, "Hey. It's not the brand name of the school you went to that tells us what you can do here. We want to know what you can actually do," and the brand name of the school is not, is increasingly not a good signifier for that. Have confidence with 2800 four-year schools in this great nation, not to mention great community colleges. I wager that the top 5% are worth a look. That's 140 colleges and universities. Let's stop letting US News and World Report profit from and prey upon our anxiety. Let's look at more lists, like Colleges That Change Lives. Let's look at alumni outcomes, like in The Alumni Factor. Okay? There are so many schools out there, and I'm delighted to be taking Sawyer on a college tour which will include big publics that aren't considered the top ten or top 20, and small colleges no one has heard of.

Tracy: We need to repeat that to ourselves over, and over, and over again. A lot of both answers of what I was hearing goes back to those really important questions that you answered together in my polling, about the rejuvenating, and about how to just recoup

and have your kids help to manage situations. I think I want to take a step back to be able to hear your thoughts on (our recent live) polling questions. Back to polling question number 2: What do you do to help them rejuvenate when you see them falling apart to the point that they cannot function anymore, or even separate degrees of that, where your kids are functioning but you're losing them. You're seeing this part of them where their soul is no longer here. They're just walking through the motions and responding.

With question number two, I want to skip to that and then move back to the other, but about recharging and rejuvenating. Getting your child back with this rat race that they're experiencing.

Ross: I think it is when you are feeling like you're just constantly going through the motions. You're going through the motions to go to school, and then whatever structured activity you have after that, instruments, sports, volunteer activities, everything else. Some, I think, students who go through that are doing it with a passion. They have a passion for that instrument or they have a passion for that activity, the sport, or what they're volunteering in, and I think others, at certain times, are going to get lost then, like, "Why am I even doing this?" Not everybody who plays an instrument loves it every day. Not everybody who plays a sport loves it every day. Not everybody who volunteers loves it every day.

I think the bigger question in those moments is not, how do you recharge and rejuvenate them. It's keeping them passionate about something, which as a teenager is really difficult to begin with, but keep using it (passion in your) language, engaged in them, that they care about what they're doing, and that they're interested in what they're doing so that they have a natural affinity for it. As opposed to just focusing on they need to recharge and rejuvenate because you're so caught up, keep that (on the) forefront for them being passionate, engaged, involved, and wanting to do the things they're doing as opposed to just having them all.

We all have things we have to do, and we all fall into the most same thing, and we know what that feels like, but I think as you get to become an adult, you know what you're passionate about, and you have that release. You seek it out, so building that language and example for them as a teenager is important.

Julie: Tracy, you used really terrible language. You said, "If your soul is no longer there. If your kid's soul is no longer here, how do you get your child back?" If there is anyone in this room who feels they're at that point, it's time for an extraordinarily huge shift, in whatever is going on. We must not wait until we discovered this. Okay? We must care sooner than that, that whatever childhood experience they're having is leading to that point, that is the indictment of the way we're raising kids in communities like ours, when we can actually say, "Yeah. That's how my kid is feeling."

Just think back to your own childhood. If you're looking for a reminder about what joy is in a child, what happiness looks like, what achievement looks like, try to look back to your own self, and think about, "How can I put back into my kid's life a little bit of what I

had in mine?" I think what we're getting at is, self-directed, intrinsically-motivated kids who are passionate about something, that's a beautiful thing. I'm not against hard work. I'm not against rigor. I'm not against being highly committed to things that matter. We should all want that for ourselves and our kids. Too often, we are the ones dragging our kids down the path we have laid, where they're essentially doing their life as they've been told, often very well, by external measure, but they are externally motivated to doing those things, and that's what leads to this sense of, "I'm being crushed by this expectation, by this pressure." That's what we don't want to let happen for our kids.

Sometimes I hear from parents who have read my book, and they say, "You know, here's my story about what I've done differently in my house," and one of the things that brings me joy is a story like, "I stopped asking my daughter every day, how much homework does she have. I stopped trusting that she cares about her homework. She is interested in getting it done." The mom didn't announce to her daughter, "I'm going to stop doing this," or she might've gently said, "You know, I realize I'm always asking. I'm sorry about that." She let a week go by, and then she tallied what had happened. You know what increased? The amount of laughter in the home. The mother and daughter were laughing together. They were enjoying time together, and not because the daughter was blowing off her homework. The daughter was doing her work, and the daughter learned in that week, "It's on me to get my work done."

Part of this is we're so intertwined in our egos with our kids, it's like, "I need to make sure. I need to make sure. If I don't make sure, then they won't do it." Boy, what's the long term strategy there? We got to back up a little bit and say, "Hard work matters in this family. Homework matters, but I trust that you're on it, that you'll do it, and that other things matter to do you as well, and I'm not here to tell you precisely when and how to do everything."

Tracy: I think that an additional key focus to that question number two is also about not wanting your focus to be rejuvenating them, to get them back into an academic focus, to get them geared up, energized, and ready for that, but really rejuvenated, really just feeling a sense of who they are, and what you're experiencing in their life outside of academics themselves. Just learning a lot about the rest of their interests, and habits, and functions every day.

Julie: I thought Tiffany's example of the no technology Shabbat was pretty powerful. I don't know how many of you ... How many of you were like, "Whoa." Anyone? Like, "I don't know if I could pull that off in my family." One of the things she said was, "We're the parents. We get to set the rules in our family, and enforce them." We're the grownups. We are the adults. Often, we're kind of advocating that role. We're very interested in being the concierge, the helper, the personal assistant, the friend. It's hard to be the hard ass parent and say, "Guess what? No technology that the dinner table, or at breakfast, or for an entire day." My goodness, but how inspiring. I found that an inspiring example. I'm trying to figure out how to take that back to my house, because if we had a day ... Shoot, if we had four hours without technology, imagine the conversations that could emerge. Imagine how many times we could look each other in

the eye. I'm inspired by her example to figure out, what's the thing that I can do to model that in my own home?

Ross: I think, to piggyback off that, the most important concept ... As parents, we can model a lot of different things. . Throughout my talk, I focus on biology, because there are a lot of things ... My parents were modeling in my family, not by any other choice or any of their awareness. It was just things that they had seen, that they did, and so if you really want to try and change things, your model of behavior matters. It's not the only factor. There are outside factors that aren't as strong, but that modeling of behavior really matters.

Tracy: A great example of that was question number one, and of giving different options of what you're going to do there. If you actually witness a text that's problematic, that you're looking at with your son or with your daughter, do you model that behavior by ignoring it, and putting it down, and pretending like it doesn't exist, and just having it go away, or having some adult conversations of, "That's a tough one. What are we going say here? What do you think, or what did you feel when this came to you? Is this normal? Does this happen a lot? Are you worried about him?" They're hearing empathy. They're hearing problem solving within a question like that, and I think that in itself could be modeling what you're discussing.

Julie: I called 911 a couple weeks ago, because of a text. One of Sawyer's friends was staying with us for a week, because his parents were traveling, and that friend received a concerning text from yet another peer. That friend came to me and my husband and said, "I just got this text. What do I do?" There I am, with someone else's kid, and I'm struggling with, what do I do? Do I need to get their parents involved? Something bad happening at home, and I keep thinking of taking my life, ultimately, which happened on a later period.

Before that last text, which said, "I'm thinking I'm going to kill myself," which is what made us call 911, it was, "My father is abusive. He's hyper obsessed with academic achievement, and physically and emotionally abusive." We were struggling with, what is the right role to play in the life of a teenager who is signaling to another teen that "my father is on me literally right now." I got some advice quickly from someone else I trusted, but I'm saying modeling is trying to block my thinking out loud for the kids, kids who needed a grownup to do the right thing. My daughter finally said, "If someone's going do something, they need to do it now," and that's when I picked up the phone and called 911, and I said, "I need you to do a welfare check on a kid in the house."

The girl ended up being taken off for 5150, and she's in the system now. It was terrifying. I'm saying this because it was terrifying, terrifying to know what's the right thing. I don't want to judge that family. I don't want to make the wrong call. I don't want to make things worse by any stretch of the imagination, but her texts to her friend got worse over the course of this 22, 25 minute period, such that we moved out of this realm of, "This is ambiguous," to, "A grownup needs to do something."

I say this to you in case you've ever find yourself fearful of acting because you didn't know how ... You were afraid. You were afraid to be the one who spoke up about something. We have to do it, and our kids are counting on us to do it, and when we find the wherewithal to do it, then we're showing our kids that they can, too.

Ross: I think that the key words are disturbing content, so that's something that's not just, "Okay. It's minor. The kids can work it out." What Julie is saying is, kids need parents. They don't need friends. They don't need people in these situations who are going to just pal up with them and figure it out. They need someone to think responsibility. I've had a couple of my friends be in situations where a 12-year-old was texting about having sex, was going to have it that weekend. My friend said the best thing to me. He was like, "I own her phone. I can see these text messages. I pay for this plan," and they had a really great conversation about that text message, and what it meant to have sex, and why her body should be something that she knows more about, and something she celebrates, and something that she makes the right decision about.

I thought that was a really great example. He was like, "I'm the parent. I have to be the parent in that situation, and take charge," especially if it's disturbing. That situation that you talked about is life-threatening. It's scary.

Tracy: In both those situations, it's incredibly helpful to have parents intervene, and the kids might not welcome it. They might not ask for it, but that in itself is what we're talking about, where they need our guidance. It's not always the case where they think they need it, or they would admit that they need it, but to actually have the visual of seeing you step in, seeing your sense of calm, of how you have that, seeing your responses to things. Julie mentioned welfare checks. That's one of the hardest things to ever have to do for families and for kids, because in the situation she's discussing, that family wasn't safe at home, so it wasn't the parents themselves that were doing this welfare check. The parents and the situation created the need for the welfare check, and in similar situations that we've had here, it's been the same, where you just have to really evaluate, "Is this the right call to make? Do I need to make sure that they're absolutely safe at home?"

One of the results of that that you also need to look at, instead of how scary that is, is how transforming that can be, to actually have that welfare check. If you have someone that's knocking on your door, they don't know who it is, and they're asking about the welfare of your child, and if they're safe, and if they're okay, all of a sudden, that secret is out, and they're aware that they have to change their behavior, or they need to ask for help, or something needs to shift within the family. It can be a very positive transformation if something like that can happen.

Julie: We hope that's what's going on, and of course, we fear that the opposite will happen. This particular father in question brought his daughter's work to do while she was in the psych ward, working further into getting herself into a science research opportunity this summer. He brought her the things he was urging upon her to do, in furtherance of her own academic achievement. She was in the psych ward, threatening to kill herself, and he wanted to be sure those deadlines were not missed.

Tracy: When you have a situation like that, that father is now surrounded by people that are adults, that pull him aside, and you're right, just start to help change. She was completely on her own for years with that family situation, so I think that (welfare check) helps dramatically.

Let's do a happier subject. How about the challenge of sleep in our third (polling question), and then we'll move on to other questions (from the audience). Let's look at sleep, and the discussions, and the frustrations that parents have, when they think, "Is this just a moody teen because teens are moody, or is there a lack of sleep in their lives? How do I have my own place in that? How do I change that? How do I, as a parent, help to solve issues around dropping a class, or dropping an extracurricular, or even just having the conversation?"

Ross: I'm shocked when I go to the private schools and I ask students, in a large assembly at the whole school, "How many of you sleep eight hours? Seven hours. Six hours. Five hours. Four or less," and watch the hands go up. The amount of hands around eight or seven hours is always under 10% of the school, and I would say 90% of the school is in that six and lower area. The four or less is really concerning. The recommendations from the sleep experts are to first, talk about time management and prioritization. Is having seven activities really going to matter on your resume to get you into that school, or could you lower it to five and still feel like your achieving something, and getting to where you want to be?

In terms of helping them sleep, there's two big things. One, any screen, phone, tablet, TV, laptop, creates a blue light that stops the body from producing the chemical it needs to sleep. If they're actually trying to sleep and cannot sleep, look at the use of technology before they sleep. The second thing that everyone stresses, having a ritual to help you fall asleep. Your body loves habits. Your brain thrives off habits, because it makes it work less. As soon as your brain could figure out how to walk, it was like, let me walk, over and over again.

Sleep can be similar. Last night, I shared that it was comedy of errors to get here. I was trying to fly from Indianapolis. My first flight was canceled. They put me through Dallas, then that flight had a mechanical, and then I landed like an hour late. Then there was no airport train to get a rental car, and then I finally got to the rental car area so late that they had let go (of my reservation). Normally, I just walk to my car. I got here really late, but I have a ritual every night, that no matter what time zone I'm in, no matter where I am, I let my body know it's time to go to sleep, and I can sleep quicker because of it. That only happens with practice. It doesn't happen just because you want to sleep, and so those two things are important. Screens and a ritual are really important things to build in (to help with sleep).

Julie: I think we wonder if our kids are getting enough sleep. Sometimes we don't know. If there's a pediatrician in the room, I'm sure there are probably 12 or 15, they would all stand up right now and say, "The lack of sleep among our adolescents is reaching epidemic proportions, and is so concerning." We hear this from the physicians in our community. In our community, at Gunn, there's a sense that maybe severe sleep

deprivation is what led to at least one of our kids taking his life last year. It's not something we can discard, or say, "Well, it would be nice if they could get sleep, but they really need to do this test prep and this homework." We cannot defer the sleep they need until they're 22 and have graduated from the school we have in mind for them. We have to care about it now. We have to care about it, by extension them, more than we care about whatever it is that's occupying their time that seems to be more important than sleep.

If you don't know if your kid is getting enough sleep, remember when they were tiny, and we put them in the car, in a little car seat, and drove them around and they'd fall asleep? If your teenager is falling asleep in the car when you're driving somewhere, that's a sign that they're not getting enough sleep. We have to care about that. Yeah, I've already told you that enriched version, my story with Sawyer and the class. I want you to know that I wanted him to take all those classes, that it was excruciating for me to contemplate letting my kid drop a class. I have this grand future in mind for him, as you do for your children, and it was three weeks of watching him try to persevere through the five hours of homework a night, and trying to catch up on weekends, Saturday and Sunday.

We watched him work at it. It wasn't a let him off the hook right away kind of thing. It wasn't a, "Fine. You can just drop it." It was a decision that was hard to come to, and when you feel ... This is going to seem like it's non-secular or a strange tangent. I'm going to say it anyway. Sometimes we have to put a pet to sleep, and the veterinarians always tell us no one ever made the decision too soon. People regret often, when they're putting their pet to sleep, that they waited that long. I have to tell you, when I finally worked up the guts to say to my kid, "Do you need to drop a class?" I realized he was hearing that compassion from his parents later than he should have.

Tracy: It makes me think, as you're talking about the different examples that you've used of your own parenting styles, you've spent a lot of time as well talking with kids about their verbal explanations of what they're experiencing at home, what they wish was different, and you spent a lot of time and a lot of your touring to just ... Can you speak a little bit more, to help the audience in relation to what our kids want us, as parents, to hear?

Julie: Sure. Sometimes when I go to a school, I get to talk to the kids in an assembly, and then I get to talk to the parents at night. When I have those opportunities, I see myself as this stranger who essentially is a conduit of information from the kids to the parents. I ask them, "What would you have me relay to your parents that they might do differently, in order to be more supportive of you during this time?" These are the kinds of things I hear. "You put a lot of pressure on me. I'm my own person. I have flaws. Please accept them. Don't compare me to you, or other kids in my grade. Don't compare me to my siblings. Don't freak out every time I do something slightly wrong. Let me be me. Stop saying, 'Just do your best, honey,' then when I come up short, tell me I could've done better. Our flaws are not on you," kids want me to pass on to parents, and then this one.

"Your regrets are not ours to correct." The wisdom from kids, they're just asking for a little bit more space. They're asking to be valued as humans, not for their grades and scores. They're asking for us to back off slightly, and disentangle our own egos, our own sense of worth, from their accomplishments. I like to say we treat our kids like little bonsai trees, that we clip and prune to have the shape of a perfect human, that we think might be worthy of admission to that school we have in mind one day. I've learned, and it's a humbling lesson, that our kids are not bonsai trees. I like to think they're wildflowers, and it's our job to provide the nourishing environment for them. They deserve to become themselves, not some clipped and pruned little version of a perfect human we have in mind.

Tracy: Thank you. We've seen it in elementary school, we see it in middle school, we see it in high school and college, is this fear that our students or our own kids have a feeling average or inadequate.

Julie: Average is not inadequate.

Tracy: We've got (two audience) questions in a similar sense here, some of them talking about their own children feeling inadequate, others talking about their children feeling average. How do we, as parents, try and help them with conversations, and have them see the beauty in what they themselves are, their interests, their ideas, their thoughts, their behavior? How do we help to develop that in a world that is incredibly high functioning or achievement-oriented?

Ross: We're in this world of Instagram and Snapchat, and Facebook, where everybody has this happy, perfect life that they see everyone else having, and they don't feel like they have it. I think it goes back to everything else we've been saying, which is helping them find things they're passionate about, and things that are unique to them. I will say as much as this social media culture of, "Everyone has a great life and you don't," is happening, there is also much more celebration of the individual, of people being smart, and that being a great thing, or of people being goth, or different, or whatever. It's much more widely accepted now than it was even when I was in high school. There, it was really still stigmatized, and now, people are a little bit more accepting of each other.

It's about creating the time and the space for them to actually feel that, instead of you telling them that. It's for them to find that path where they believe it, and not just you giving them work, because that path is different for everybody. Modeling that you're okay with you, where you are in the world, and not paying attention to that crap, helps a lot, and then also reinforcing and supporting whatever it is they want to do. I think that has to be the baseline.

Julie: I think one of the reasons it's so hard to be a kid here is because we are the epicenter of everything that's amazing. We are so fortunate to live here in Silicon Valley now. We are living on the edge of what's next. We create what's next. We are the center of other people's focus, not only in this state, in this nation, but around the world. Look at us. We are evidence of what humans can do when they work hard, but we've forgotten that we're evidence of what humans can do when they're willing to try and fail, and fall. The

people who are designing the next great thing realize you're not taking enough risks. If you're on the safe path, afraid of failure, you're not going to have that breakthrough.

We live in a place that's all about fail your way forward, and yet, with our kids, we think they cannot possibly get a B. We've got to actually bring the way we raise our kids into alignment with what we know to be true from our own life experience. Max McGee, who is the superintendent of Palo Alto Unified School District, my superintendent, superintendent for my kids, has said, "You know, there's an SAT score that's in the 99th percentile nationally, but it's only in the 75th percentile at Gunn and Paly." Kids who are nationally hitting it out of the park feel mediocre at Gunn and Paly, which are schools that demand excellence. Imagine how everyone else underneath them feels. It's hard to feel that you matter in this place. Kids feel inadequate, because they're average.

Most of us are average. We got to embrace that reality. We think that when we have a gifted kid, it means that they have to be gifted at everything. Most of us have something we're great at, we're really ... It's our strength. We'll help our kids find that themselves, and let us be proud and prideful about their great character. If our kid is in fact average academically, they shouldn't feel inadequate. They should feel human, and celebrated for their effort, and for the way they treat others. We shouldn't be prouder of the kid with the A plus than we are of the kid with the Bs.

Sawyer brought home a B one day. He brought that B up from a D plus, and I was prouder of that B than I've ever been of any of his easy As. That's what our kids need to hear us say. They also need to see that we've struggled, that we, at times, are imperfect. They think we're perfect. If Madeleine Levine was here, she would remind of that, that our kids see our trajectory of the house we live in, the career we have, the title, the degree in which we're respected by peers, and they think we've made it, that our lives were this upward trajectory to success. They don't see us, that's backward, our failings, our flaws, and how we became who we are because we got back up again. We have to role model that for our kids. We are the best examples they will ever have. I love this question.

Tracy: Ross talked a lot in his discussion around coping mechanisms, and for a while, (those he was) choosing (were) very negative coping mechanisms, those weren't healthy. Nothing, just not ready to face things until he was 22, and really looking at his own, not just coping mechanisms, but everything he was battling with mental illness itself, with the bipolar disorder. (This audience) question refers specifically around substances in general. Any kids, all kids, it's a very scary thought process for middle school parents, for middle school parents who know they're going to be in the high school, and then the college parents. The question was, how do we understand and cope with the high prevalence of drinking in kids, in terms of mental health?

Ross: I think what's really tough is, we've seen slides for this showing the prefrontal cortex, and the amygdala. The amygdala is such an impulse part of the brain. The amygdala is much more developed in the brain before age 25. Binge drinking, abusing drugs, driving fast, driving drunk, having unprotected sex, all of those behaviors have a much more natural place in the brain than the prefrontal cortex, which is saying, "Maybe this isn't a

good idea. Maybe you should take a breath. Maybe you should think about this." The amount of drug and alcohol abuse that is happening in teenagers is also fueled by the impulse area of the brain, and I think that it's a really difficult conversation to have, but it's a really important conversation to have, to see how people are using substances.

There are a lot of parents who will let parties happen at their house, and let binge drinking and everything else just play out, because that's what they did, that's what kids are doing. Maybe 90% of those kids are just releasing. They're just having drinks. That's it, and then 10% are actually creating a really negative coping mechanism that's fueling something else, that is co-occurring with a mental health disorder. You have to have that conversation with your kids. You have to have the most difficult conversations with your kids. They may not be honest. They may not tell you the truth, but the only way you're ever going to find out is to ask those questions, and they might roll their eyes so hard that they fall on the floor, and they might do those things. If we don't have those difficult conversations, you're never going to know, and you're going to be left in a place of always wondering.

In terms of getting people to stop it or slow it down, it's a much harder process. It is a much more difficult process. Sometimes people do need treatment. They need to accept that that problem exists. Anything before that is not useless, but really hard for them to see, and that's why asking ... Let's say you find out that your son or daughter is binge drinking. Ask them why. Maybe they do want to shut their brain down. Maybe they do need a release, and they don't know another release that feels as good. They don't know another thing that makes them in that state, and then you're having a conversation about why they are drinking, as opposed to just saying, "Don't do it."

So many times, especially with a youth population, it's made true that we focus on the don't, don't, don't, instead of asking why. You have to ask that hard question. "Are you abusing drugs or alcohol," and then ask why. As much as you're going to want to react so strongly (with), "Stop," and "Don't," you listen. Listen to why that's their release. Listen to why that's what they're seeking out. It could be because their friends do it. It could be because it's accepted, but it could be something else, and that's the only way to really get those answers.

Julie: Yeah, I'm struggling with this. I've got a 16-year-old and a 14-year-old, and if my son wanted to sit around and have a glass of sherry with the kids he talks philosophy with, no, I wouldn't allow that. To me, if that was the desire, if that was the impotence for drinking, I wouldn't be concerned. If it's to escape reality, if it's to cope, if it's because life sucks and I want to end up binge drinking and blacking out for a while because I feel better, I would be terribly concerned. Your (to Ross) point about why (is important). Why are they exhibiting these behaviors?

Many of us have an unhealthy addiction around alcohol. Many of us enjoy alcohol in a way that is not at all addictive, or leading to any harm, and we want to be able to discern the why behind our kids' behaviors around alcohol as well.

Tracy: For both of you, some of what the parents need some guidance on is that difference between empowerment and enablement, so when are things getting to a point where you're enabling your child, and when are you maybe possibly masking that and calling it empowerment, but really want to enable? There's a cycle. There could be the goal of, "I just want you to feel empowered. I want you to feel confident and self-assured."

Ross: This is something I brought up, and it's a really tough line. You could have three kids, and that line between empowering and enabling is different for each of them, that you could try one thing with one of them and it backfires horrible, you see it right away, but for the other kid it's like, "Oh, okay. I get this." What I was trying to refer to in saying the fine line between enabling and empowering was, when I left college the first time and came out of the psychiatric ward. Whether it was disorder, whether it was me, whether it was a combo, the only thing I wanted to do was lay on the couch. I didn't believe I was capable of anything. I didn't believe there was much I could do or offer. I believed that the disorder had won.

My parents pushing me to do basic tasks eventually led me seeing that I could do other things. Had they, and I'm just going to use this example for me, and I don't want to offend any other families or anything like that. Had they enabled me to just lay on that couch for years, I'd still be on that couch. I didn't have the fight in that moment. I didn't see a reason to keep trying, but then making me take jobs that I never imagined ever wanting to work, or would ever be at, showed me that, "Okay, you can do something. You're not just this disorder. You're not just this diagnosis," and it eventually led to me taking a class or two at a community college, to see like, "Okay, you can still go to school." It eventually led me back to a really great school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and showed me, "Okay, you can still do some things."

Did it fix everything? No. There was still a lot of battles to be fought, but in that specific moment, it showed me, "Okay. You're not just this disorder." There are a lot of examples like that, when you're talking about specifically mental health disorders, where that line between enabling and empowering really does matter. It's sensitive, and I hated my parents during it, and I complained, and I didn't want to do it, but it changed my life, and I can see that looking back. In the moment, our house was just filled with conflicts. It was just filled with arguments and anger, but they were still trying to look towards that end goal of, "You're not just this disorder. You have to at least try something."

What I tried in the beginning was just working part time at a restaurant, at like 20 hours a week. Eventually, it was classes at a community college, and then eventually it was these other things. That was a critical moment for me, but that line isn't easy to walk.

Julie: There's an addiction treatment center in Los Angeles called Beit T'Shuvah, founded in the tenants of the Jewish faith. Clients are increasingly young, 18 to 25, and they have a parent ed program there, that's helping parents support their addict in recovery and beyond. They lovingly call their parent ed program Mothers Without Borders. They say the mindset they have in that program is, for parents of addicts, that you have to be able to put your child down, not in an emotionally demeaning way, but literally you

carry your child when they're a year old, but you have to be willing to set your child down, and realize you're not carrying your 22-year-old anymore, or if you are, you shouldn't be.

I think this is speaking to the enabling question. I'm facing that right now with my kid, the one you've heard about. He's a science kid, who wants to do a PhD in biology, genetics. This is clearly his passion. I know he should do some science research. That father who was obsessed with having his daughter apply for science research opportunities in the psych ward, well, I'd like my son to apply for those too. In fact, having worked at Stanford, I know three or four people I could call. I could pick up the phone and say, "Will you take my kid this summer?" I'm not doing that.

I've mentioned to my son time and time again, probably three or four thoughtful times, how helpful, how useful, it would be for him to do some research over the summer to deepen his knowledge in the field, and it'll show a college that he's serious about biology. I've realized, he's got to be the kid who wants to secure that opportunity for himself. I will give him feedback on an email he writes, but he has to take, have the (initiative). I know from talking to too many professors, if I manufacture that opportunity for him, as there's no doubt in my mind I could, he will show up in that lab without any skin in the game and not be as useful as he could be.

When he's ready to procure that opportunity for himself, he will, whether it'll come in time to impress some college, to be honest, I don't know. I've decided that that's, for me, on that one example, that's the line between empowerment and enablement. I've talked with him about the value of doing it. I've given him some suggestions, but he's got to hunker to that himself.

Ross: The hardest part of that is watching them maybe not ... I don't want to use the word "fail," but not do what you would like them to do. Like I said, my parents didn't think I'd live to be 21. They could not have thought of those moments that I was actually embracing that, or seeing it the way they saw it, and in those moments as a parent, it is important for you to communicate, with whoever you are in a relationship with, about your fear, about the loss, about the ... Just everything you're feeling, so that you can maintain your mental health as you're trying to empower them. If you don't talk about that fear, if you don't talk about your concerns for them, it's going to eat you alive.

So far, all of our questions are focused so much on, "What do we do with the kids?" As parents, you have to take care of your mental health during all this, too. You have someone in your life you can talk to. You have someone in your life you can express your fear to. You modeling that behavior of managing your mental health, going back to modeling, will help your kids, too.

In this discussion between empowering and enabling, if you're afraid, and if you have any feelings, tell someone about it.

Julie: None of us wants to raise our hand right now in response to the question I'm about to ask. The question is, do we feel our worth as humans is really a function of how well our

kids are doing by these objective measures our society has? Do we feel better about ourselves when our kid's GPA is high, and worse about ourselves when their GPA dips? Do we? Too many of us do. The last two chapters of my book are about reclaiming ourselves as human. Reclaiming ourselves so that we can be more loving toward ourselves, so that we can be more loving toward our kids. They see our anxiety, and our worry, that we act as if every piece of homework, every quiz, every grade, every activity, every afternoon in their lives is a make or break moment for us. God, imagine what a cloud that must feel like, the gray cloud of parental concerns, that just hovers over our kids every afternoon.

If we can get a little bit clearer about our own selves, and that our kids are their own independent beings, we have the humbling, fears, terror, joy, privilege of being alongside them, trying to help them become, but that they are not us. They have their own dreams. To be interested in them getting to the point where they can actually live out their dreams, and we've got our own dreams. We need to model for our kids what a healthy, vibrant adult life looks like. No wonder so many of them are failing to launch. We don't make adults look very attractive, because all we do is stand on the sidelines in kids' lives and worry about homework.

We knit. We like to play flag football. We like to play cards. We like to chat with friends. We like to cook. We garden. We ski. We travel. We hike. Our kids need to see that adults have passions beyond the passion of getting my kid to the right college. It helps if we're passionate about our partner. We got to model for our kids what love looks like, and to the extent, we could look our partner in the eye and give a damn about our partner, and our primary relationship. That's the reason our kids existed. That's probably one of the best things we could do for our kids, is to restore that, nourish that, nurture that, care about that almost more than we care about anything.

Go away with your partner. You want to do something well for your kid, good for your kid? Fall back in love with your spouse or your partner. Boy, I'm really off topic, aren't I? No. This is parent ed, too.

Tracy: I would add to that, and if that's not a case, if you're in a totally different situation with that, what you're trying to do is to build those friendships, and build that support, and build that unconditional love, with all types of people, whether those are coaches, or spouses, or partners, or friends, or family members, but to just build that in lots of different directions so that your kids are seeing that value, and that substance of relationships that you're surrounding yourself with.

Julie: Amen.

Tracy: We are running low on time with lots of questions, but a purpose of the conference itself is, so many of these are very similar in the things that we've been trying to cover for you today. What we're going to try and do also, with the notes that we've taken for this discussion time as well as for Tiffany's talk and Ross's talk, is to put a lot of these questions and help with answers and a thought process on the website as well, so that you feel that your voice and your questions have been heard throughout this process.

This topic in itself, I'm so proud of this community to be willing to have a roomful of people with such heavy conversation. It is a lot, and it's really scary to raise our kids these days, and we cannot start changing that culture without being here and learning how to do that, and starting to think about what our role is in helping to change that culture, instead of just wanting that culture to change.

I'm just proud of the entire community that created an environment to have this tough conversation, with two people that got to the thick of it, with really difficult things to hear, but you had open ears and an open heart to listen to that, so thank you both so much for being here today.