

# Parent Hope Podcast

Season 2 Episode 1

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Host: Jenny Brown

Guest: Robin Schults

Topic: How parents can partner with schools to increase student and family confidence

Transcript:

Jenny

Well, it is my great pleasure today to welcome Dr. Robin Schulz as our guest. She is coming all the way from the greater Chicago area. It's evening where you are, Robin, and morning where I am. We're speaking from the top ends of the globe. Dr. Robin Schulz is a retired school social worker with 20 years of experience working in schools in the Chicago area. Robin is now in private practice working with a whole range of client presentations, very experienced in Bowen Family Systems Theory, has been on faculty at one of the network centers in Chicago and is just the right person to be speaking on today's topic. How parents can partner with schools to increase student and family confidence. It's a great topic, Robin. Welcome. Thank you for being here. And I wonder, I wonder what you would say about this choice of topic because we went back and forth on emails a little bit on the topic.

Robin

Thank you for inviting me.

Jenny Brown

Do you want to just say a little bit about your choice of this longer topic, a big sentence about parents partnering with schools to increase both student and family confidence? There's a lot in there. Any thoughts on your choice of the topic?

Robin

I chose the title of the topic because I think there's a lot involved in parent and school partnerships to begin with. And I think that there's sometimes a lower level of confidence on the parent's part when they think that the school is the professional in this situation and

dealing with their child. And I think this the school sometimes doesn't really give the parents a chance to

use their input. And so I you know my experience in schools taught me that we really have to build a partnership from the beginning in order to best service both schools and parents and children.

Jenny Brown

Well, it will be good to think with you about what makes for a strong partnership and what are some of the pitfalls there. What do you think? Let's start with that. What makes for positive partnerships between parents and schools?

Robin

Parents and teachers must work together to provide the best experience for the student. I think parents often know they entrust their children with schools, and they also know their children in a different setting. And so, schools you know receive children and they work with them, and they see the child from their perspective as parents are seeing the child from their perspective. And if we don't partner together and understand that, you know, the child can be two different, you know, be in two different environments and demonstrate different skills in both settings, there can end up being a blame game or a misunderstanding. And so, I think partnership is really important in order to service a student or a child and to the best of our ability.

Jenny Brown

It is really helpful to think about how the child can present quite differently, even different capacities in different environments. If I got that right, that's what you're saying. And so what can both students and teachers and educators, I mean parents, sorry, what can parents and educators do with that awareness that the child can be quite different in different environments?

Robin

I think it can be useful for schools to understand that their students are they're more comfortable in their homes. They have different relationships with their parents and their siblings. And you know realize that when a parent says that you know the student looks different or isn't able to perform a skill at home that they hear they're performing at school I think it's important for both parties to realize that nobody is misreporting and nobody is wrong. We're just seeing the student responding to their environment in different ways

because they're in different environments. So understanding that helps us work together to get a more a broader understanding of what the student is capable of and wh at environmental factors they may or may not be responding to at school or at home.

Jenny Brown

Yeah, yeah. So that's a theme coming right through is that the environment does play a part. It's not just all about the individual child. And I'm thinking about

how important it is for both sides to be curious and listen to the other, what's to understand the child in the different contexts, are those conversations that you would encourage between teachers and parents?

Robin

Yes, absolutely, I would encourage them. I'm thinking back to my own experience working in the school system. And one of the functions of my job, besides working with students, of course, and then working with families and teachers, but one of the greater functions of my job was to do something called a functional analysis, which sounds very clinical and hard to understand. But in reality, it was very simple. And this I found to be and I'll explain what that is in just a minute but what I found it to be a real conversation starter with parents after doing this functional analysis which was observing their student their child in the school setting and looking for environmental factors that may impact the students behavior or their learning or any part of them. And those environmental factors are not necessarily just things that, you know, concrete things that happen. They're us as teachers and social workers that impacted the students behavior. And so being able to sit down with a parent and say, listen to what I've learned. I was so surprised to see this, but coming at it from a place of curiosity and just intrigued and then sharing it with the parent and hearing them be as surprised and intrigued as well helped to really build bridges over time and working with parents, you know, throughout a school year to develop this relationship and this common ground of understanding their child or their student was really helpful.

Jenny Brown

What strikes me, Robin, as you describe this functional assessment is it's looking at the whole child and their coping and their capacities and where they struggle. It's observable behaviors and ways of managing the school context in the classroom and outside of the classroom. And that is so different to a lot of the current focus. Certainly here in Australia, I wonder what it's like in the US where there's a lot of monitoring looking for clinical symptoms and tracking the presence of clinical mental health symptoms in the children

and filling in surveys of the children. Does that go on in your country? And what do you think is the effect of it compared to this more whole child curiosity about their different capacities?

Robin

That is common in our school system and in the schools in the United States we have typically we have a school psychologist and a school social worker who share a lot of the same functions but they differ in just that is the psychologist the school psychologist. Use a lot of those assessment tools and questionnaires and a lot of their background and experience in. You know, assessing from that that.

vantage point. School social workers typically do more observational assessment and that means looking at the environment and looking at you know looking at students in their daily activities without any preconceived ideas about what might be going on and just looking at what happened first, what was the behavior, what happened afterwards. And then, you know, looking at that for a period of half an hour, 45 minutes, and recording it without any preconceived idea of what's happening. And then later sitting down and realizing, okay, when this, when a staff person or a teacher says something to the student, this is what typically happened. And look, it happened five or six times. And, you know, or when, you know, the bell went off, this is what happened. And so you can really get a clear, observable picture of what impacts this particular student. And you can start to understand what kinds of things are having the ability to change the behavior in a student, whether it's words, language being used by a particular person, a particular time of day, a subject, another child, it really can be helpful.

Jenny Brown

that's very useful to think about. And it reminds me of a lot of the work that with Parent HOPE Project programs happens with parents and their clinician is let's just track the behavior, not make interpretations, not focus on the symptoms particularly, but to see the back and forth and how much insight can come from that. So I'm hearing that you're doing something similar in the school environment, which is really interesting. When you think about partnerships with parents and schools, what are the key things in your vast experience tend to get in the way of positive partnerships that, as you say, increase both the students and the family's confidence? What can derail those outcomes?

Robin

I think they can be derailed when there's a breakdown in communication between school staff and parents. When there is a preconceived idea on maybe the parents part that the school doesn't understand their child. Because children, you know, do function differently in their homes than they do in schools. Sometimes it's hard for the school to believe that the child can't perform a particular task at home that they're clearly performing at school and vice versa. It's hard for parents to believe that a student can actually do these tasks in school that they're not able to do at home. And so I think without partnering and sitting down and having parents feel like the school is on the side of understanding their child as they understand them it's almost as if two camps can develop. And so it really is important to work together and really understand the student from both different perspectives.

Jenny Brown

Do you have any thoughts on what you see parents and teachers understanding their roles, if you like? and not getting confused about who's responsible for what. My sense is in talking to parents that, and as you've already mentioned, there can be a frustration with the school, a sense of blame and wanting to move in and tell the school how to do their job, and probably vice versa. What have you found of that kind of role confusion over the years?

Robin

that it exists, that, you know, there is, there can be, you know, sort of a cross blaming. And if we let that take the lead without partnering early, it can be prevalent throughout the student's school experience. But it's not helpful. I mean, what is really helpful is trusting that, okay, I have some information as a school social worker or another school professional. I have some information, but not all. And the parents have some information, but not all. And so, you know, if we can recognize that, you know, we are working together, and I may have pieces, but not everything that I need. I'm going to have to rely on my partner, the parent, or my partner, the school professional to have the whole picture of the child. I think that can be really helpful.

Jenny Brown

Robin, can you think of any examples? It will be hard to select one from all of your years of involvement in schools, but an example of when a problematic blaming relationship

between parent and school and student in the mix of it all, how that turned around, how that...moved in a more thoughtful direction and what goes into that happening.

Robin

Yeah I actually can think of many examples but I'll just sort of go with a theme that comes to mind is that you know when there is a relationship between parent and school that doesn't gel right from the beginning. I think a turning point can be when the parent understands that the school has their best interest in the best interest of the student at heart and that you know.

There's there's so many formal meetings that take place in schools but those kinds of understandings I think come from the more informal meetings. Many times as a school social worker when there was a relationship with a parent that had started off bumpy. I would go out of my way to contact the parent just through a phone call. You know, whenever I saw the student doing something at school that was just really delightful or something that caught my attention and I would just call and say hey guess what I saw today this is what he did and parents like they enjoy knowing that the school staff is seeing the positive sides of their student and you know is really invested and likes the student and so I thought you know I found that building a personal relationship with the parent in addition to the relationship around their student was really key.

Jenny Brown

That's a great example because it has me thinking that the majority of times the parent gets a call from the school. It's about a problem or a real concern. And you're describing something quite different as attending to the child's progress and capacities rather than the problems. So any more you want to add to that shift? in focus, problem focus, compared to the kind of being aware of the whole child. And of course, no school social worker well-being teacher can be across every child to do this. So any more thoughts on how to do this realistically and not get caught in just parents are called in when there's a problem?

Robin

I think, you know, we just like you said, Jenny, we call parents whenever there's a problem, but I think being mindful that, you know, the student is more than just negative behavior that they may or may not demonstrate or low academics where they're capable. And, you know, just Making it a priority to pay attention to the positive and try to turn the relationship. I, you know, we've talked about sort of the the semantics of parents and school relationships, but there's this whole other side of prioritizing seeing the child in a

positive light no matter what. And so I think as school staff, you know, I often observed, you know, sometimes teachers would get frustrated with a child or, you know, administrators myself, but not making that the relationship. Making sure that we lowered the intensity that we place on the relationship with a child. And so I would try and work with teachers also to be more casual around those problematic students and be more humorous at times and try to balance the focus that we gave to the problems and counterbalance it by giving you know as much focus as just casual interaction like we would with any student. And that went so far in turning students around sometimes when they were just adults that were now interacting with them in a lighthearted positive way when the students themselves might have in their mind, I'm the problem student. And so I have to play that role. But being treated as if, no, you're a great student, it just helps shift the focus, I think, on the from the adult angle and also on the student's perception of who they are.

Jenny Brown

Hmm. Yeah that's great. So it's really showing that this is dealing with the relationship not the individual child here and that the adult has a part to play in shifting the tone of that relationship. That's very much a family systems lens in terms of it's tackling the emotional process, the back and forth between people rather than trying to fix or change another.

Jenny Brown

too much about a Bowen family systems approach. How do you bring that lens into your work in schools, Robin?

Robin

I used to talk a lot about it when I would do the functional analysis and then I would always sit down with staff members who worked with that particular student prior to talking with parents about the information found and tried to in sort of layman's terms let people know teachers and administrators and other adults working with the student to you know that the focus needs to shift from the student sometimes to ourselves and we You know, to kind of think about how our interactions with the student impact the student. And so we would do some role playing in how do you be more casual and friendly and warm when you're very, very frustrated because this is a normal thing. And those short of sessions that we had where we really talked about, this is what was found in the functional analysis. This is how we as adults can change our behavior to impact, hopefully, maybe impact the students' response and then practice it and talk each other through. It was very helpful.

Jenny Brown

Yeah. Do you think it's a similar process with parents and their child to teachers looking at their part?

Robin

I do. I do think it is a similar process. I am not to get too in depth, but I did conduct my research in this area and, you know, very low level intervention really no intervention just looking at factors that in the schools and in the home in terms of adult interaction with students and what the impact was. And I did see that there was some impact in the intensity of the relationship between the adults and students that impacted their response. And so I do.

Jenny Brown

Yeah, well for listeners, I have some of your publications listed in front of me Robin and I see that your Doctorate that the topic is really quite something it gets my attention It's getting to the bottom of anxiety using Bowen Family Systems Concepts to examine the impact of family interaction patterns on a child's academic and social

Robin

The mouth hit the mouthful.

Jenny Brown

But there's a lot of wealth of scholarship and knowledge and research to tap into with you. Of course we don't have too much time but from all of that research and your lived experience How do you think parents can best deal with their worries about their child and how they're doing at school? I could ask the same question about teachers, of course, and you might want to take both, but... So let's do that. Let's say, how can parents best deal with their worries about a child and how they're managing at school? We'll start with that one, and then you can add your thoughts from the other side.

Robin

So I think in terms of parents, and as you mentioned earlier, I'm in private practice. And I have been in private practice for quite a while and practicing from a systems perspective because that's my belief. Even though I'm also trained psychodynamically and I value that training, systems functioning has helped me to really understand family functioning, my own family functioning, and other family functioning to get to your question, I think parents



and teachers, but parents can really shift, if they can shift their focus away from trying to change their child, and I'll just add in there, or their spouse, or everybody, but they can shift their focus from trying to change their child to a focus on themselves. And we use that language all the time and we can talk about it, but we don't, I don't think, really let ourselves understand exactly what that means and what it kind of looks like. But if we can study that and kind of realize it's pretty simple, but it is pretty profound to shift the focus from somebody else to ourselves. And it's profound because the being that it's a system in all relationships or systems, the relationship system changes. If I change my behavior or my thinking and my perception, the relationship cannot not change. It just...it changes. And I think that goes, you know, that speaks to parents and children. And there's a whole host of other relationships we could talk about, but we're not going to do that today. And the same thing goes for teachers in school, if they can change shift the focus to their own thinking and their own behavior. And, and when I use the term behavior, I mean, how do we interact with others? And there's a lot that goes into that, you know, we can talk about, but it really comes down to us focusing on ourselves.

Jenny Brown

Mm-hmm. I'm glad that you clarified for listeners that this is.

The focus on self is on our own thinking and our behaviors and how we behave in different contexts, in different ways. It's that kind of focus on self because I do have quite a few parents say, are you telling me just to leave my child be and get on with my own life and work all the time and look after myself? And it's quite confusing for parents to hear focus on self.

Jenny Brown

that they confuse that message and it's such a different message from all the focus on children's needs and children's mental health. Your thoughts on that Robin?

Robin

I, yeah, I've had that same experience. One of the things that I do now, I work with parents in my practice now as well. And so one of the things that I teach parents to say to their children, if they're willing, is I have all the confidence in you that you can figure this out. And statements like that are very simple. But really changing our language a little bit that shifts the responsibility for the problems being solved from us to our children is really easy

to do. And it, it delivers a message to them that they're capable. And so, I think that's one of the ways that I try to make that happen or help parents come to that conclusion.

Jenny Brown

Yeah, yeah, helpful. And for parents to really believe that, as opposed to just say it as a technique, how do they get there?

Robin

Well, it's almost like act as if first and you know the feelings will follow. It's going to take a while but if you can fake it till you make it, it can be helpful.

Jenny Brown

Yeah, yeah. So I we've talked a lot about parents and parents in school, and I am just aware of the value of the big thinking you've done on this topic. I did read one of your recent papers on some of the problems that you see with schools and policy and you outlined a list of problems and there are three I'm going to summarize because I just think they relate so well to this topic. The first is that you're seeing in the broader society that children's stress in all its variations, chronic stress, different kinds of relationship stress, all variations of stress have been collapsed into a single category of trauma. I'll just pause on that one. I didn't give you a heads up that I was gonna ask you about it, but I was reading your paper and thinking, wow, yeah, I'm seeing that all around. Everything gets labeled as trauma. Do you have some thoughts that relate to this podcast? How is that impacting the way schools and parents are relating to students?

Robin

I do have some thoughts about that. When I was working in the school system, which was up until 2021, and so that was through the beginning of the pandemic. But even before that, there has been a shift in student in mental health in schools towards educating educators about trauma and a main focus on how to deal with trauma, what it is. And I You know, I saw all those, I thought about them, I understood them, I think, pretty well. But I also think that a focus on trauma it takes a giant shift away from focusing on the opportunities that come from trauma. And my approach in private practice, and even when

I worked in the school system, was, yes, let's acknowledge trauma exists, and it exists in the student, but let's not dwell on that. Let's see how we can use this to shift the focus towards what the student can do. That is, sometimes trauma is a good springboard for resiliency.

Jenny Brown

Mm-hmm. Yeah. The other thing that you write about is just how different stressors, schools and policymakers, may miss that they happen not just in the individual. And you've spoken about that so clearly today. They're in an environment of lots of back and forth.

Robin

Thank you.

Jenny Brown

variation of direction processes in relationship between people and between the environment and just how much adult behaviors, I'm reading some of your words here, how adult behaviors and interaction both amongst themselves and with students can impact student outcomes. So it's moving from this everything's about treating trauma to let's look at the relationship environment and deserves more attention. How do you think that educators can give this appropriate attention?

Robin

Well, I think I had the benefit and I'm going to say also the curse of going through a Bowen Theory postgraduate training program while I was still in my school career. And I think of course that does not really mean that, but it did, it woke me up to learning about the reciprocal interaction patterns that develop amongst people in general. The school system was a microcosm of that for me. It happened in families, and I was aware of learning the family systems approach. I have a family myself, but the school system, there are so many stressors that go on a day-to-day basis. I was able to observe and recognize how I had been a part of a lot of different interaction patterns that were occurring in school systems just because there are self-contained building with lots of adults. And so, seeing these patterns and experiencing them and being a part of them and then seeing students and how they sometimes were caught in the middle of the adult interaction patterns was mind-boggling to me. And I think I've probably gotten far away from your question, but that was where that came from in that article.

Jenny Brown

Yes, you could see just how important that...back and forth interaction pattern between the adults is. So, to pull it back together, listeners are probably thinking we're going off on a whole new track away from the topic of how can parents' partner with schools. How would you summarize what parents can do if they see that the school interactions are very anxious and intense around their child and other children? What can parents do about that?

Robin

Well, I think I think possibly the first thing they could do is just kind of learn more about it. You know, for myself, it was, you know, knowledge, you know, kind of brought it into my awareness of, you know, how I function in you know my job and my relationships. And so then I started seeing it in other people. So I think learning a little bit more about our functioning and what the part that exists, even if we don't recognize it or know about it or pay attention to it can be a good first step. In terms of how can parents, you know, deal with that in terms of schools. I think school mental health right now is in some other crisis in public education because there is a lot going on in school mental health and social emotional functioning of students and staff and things like that. And there needs to be some change and I know that you know public school systems that you know are looking at that. But I feel like we need to take a step outside of what we've already done over the decades and try something different. And to me that is looking at functioning in you know in between humans and learning more about how we can manage ourselves in a way that's going to be helpful and helpful for our kids. It reminds me of one of the pieces that has stood out for me from Dr. Bowen's writing that when there are symptoms, the focus on functioning rather than fixing is so much more useful. Function, not fix. And I think I'm hearing that coming from your lived experience in the school environment and your private work with parents as well. We need to put this together, Robin, it's been so interesting. Is there anything you'd like to say to summarize how parents can best deal with their worries about their children and how they're doing at school?

in that part of school.

Jenny Brown

Right, that's a really nice place to wrap it up. Lots to think about and this word functioning, just definition, how is this one? It's just to focus on how we manage ourselves in each

situation. Is that a good definition for people who are not familiar with the idea of that word functioning? Yeah.

Robin

Yes, how do I manage myself? How do I maintain my own calm?

Jenny Brown

Mm-hmm. Yeah, great. Well Robin, this has been a really useful conversation. I think it will be useful for many people, parents and teachers in school, mental health professionals as well. So I really appreciate your time and sharing your experience and your scholarship with us today. Thank you, Dr. Schultz.

Robin

Thank you for having me on, Jenny.