

How to Parent When You Know Too Much

A conversation about juggling caregiving roles, the work, and the world.

Alison Feigh, JWRC Director | 2025



1

As we begin

- I am NOT an expert in parenting.
- I owe thanks to all those willing to sit down with me and unpack hard questions and great joys.
- Each person gets to define parenting/caregiving and family from their own experience.
- There are always intersecting identities that change how we are seen in the world and how the world sees us and our family.
- Content Warning – You are encouraged to do what works to help you take in information



2

Questions for our Time Together



<https://unsplash.com/photos/sgLB0wME4DQ>

- What are the challenges you have found doing this work as a parent/caregiver?
- What are the joys and ways that you look at parenting differently because of this work that are positive?
- What are things that you want to keep doing? What are things you want to add or change?



3

Perfection is NOT the Goal



"I am not a perfect parent simply because of my professional role." – Child Protection Social Worker



4

Vicarious Trauma

First defined by McCann and Pearlman (1990)

"The phenomenon termed "vicarious traumatization" can be understood as related both to the graphic and painful material that trauma clients often present and to the therapist's unique cognitive schemata or beliefs, expectations, and assumptions about self and others."

It has also been referred to as the "cost of caring."



5

Exposure to Trauma

"...Those who work with children traumatized by abuse and/or neglect, including, but not limited to, child welfare, child protection, counselors, healthcare providers, advocates, law enforcement, and prosecutors investigating crimes against children, are exposed to traumatic stories daily in their work. Negative reactions to this witnessing of other people's trauma results in *vicarious traumatization* (also referred to as secondary traumatic stress) which can manifest as mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, work-related and/or social consequences."

Molnar, et al. 2020, Child Abuse & Neglect



6

World View

"I describe this work as being on a High Speed train, and no longer being able to realize it.....look at the floor all seems normal, look at the person next to you all seems normal, but look out the window and trees and countryside are whizzing by....in this work, we are dealing with violence, trauma, tragedy daily, sometimes multiple times a day, we are seeing, hearing, smelling and having to resolve peoples worst violent, tragic, traumatic experiences, as one of many "cases" we are responding to. Day in day out, week in week out, month in month out, year in year out. This is not normal or a humane condition for a human being to deal with on their own."

—Det. Mike Johnson



7

Breaking Cycles or Healthy Patterns



- My goal as a parent is to parent in an exact opposite way than the parenting I received in my family
- My goal as a parent is to try to replicate the same kind of connection and level of respect I had with my parent



8

"You didn't have a choice about the parents you inherited, but you do have a choice about the kind of parent you will be."

—Marian Wright Edelman



9

Challenges

"Practitioners working with disturbed and neglected children and young people face many practical and personal challenges, including countertransference and secondary trauma reactions."

"Despite the literature supporting the view that mental health professionals experience secondary trauma in its various forms, limitations remain in the broader literature in terms of conceptual clarity and an understanding of the consequences of working with clients who have been traumatized."

Fixen, Ridge, and Evans, 2019, "Momma bear wants to protect." Counselling and Psychotherapy Research



10

How We Enter the Work Matters

- Entering due to trauma, crisis, or death – can feel like an extra layer of responsibility or can feel like a step toward justice
- Entering the work as a strategy for healing
- Being assigned this work as a rotation or a skill building assignment without preparation – learning on the job

"Originally, I was so naive. I would shake my head that there were people in the world like this. I became a sponge and started to learn the good, the bad, and the ugly." – Patty Wetterling



11

Full Time vs Full Life



"Our families have to think about this work. Our kids have a reality some want to protect them against."
–Cordelia Anderson

<https://pixabay.com/users/pexels-2286921/>



12

Challenge Themes

- Our worries are different
- Hypervigilance – internal and external
- Overly cautious. Some may say paranoid
- How we manage our stress impacts our family
- We live and see the worst-case scenarios and sometimes our families do too
- Intense focus on protection
- Everyone has a story, but I can't hold all the stories
- Each conference brings home new worries



13

Challenge Themes

- Working in environments that perpetrate abuse
- Trauma Olympics – comparing our stories to client stories
- Financial concerns of working in this field
- Anger
- Relatives who don't get it – "You are making your life hard."
- Fear and panic around drugs and alcohol
- What is age appropriate in our family vs other families?



14

Challenge Themes

- Conversations with my elementary school aged child that other parents don't have with their kids until they are pre-teens
- Things are matter of fact in our house which can be a double-edged sword
- Parenting is one identity that I don't remove
- I realize it isn't my job to educate everyone else
- Being present in big feelings is exhausting – personally and professionally



15

Challenge Themes

- Professions who are cynical and hopeless are sometimes the ones who are training in new people
- You have no or little control about when to take a break
- Problems present when working past your shelf life as a professional in this field
- We don't always process our trauma
- Where can I get energy? Where can I recharge?



16

Challenge Themes

- Articles are always sent to my inbox. It is too big to take in fully and all the time.
- More understanding and less understanding of child abuse at the same time
- When your child is struggling with behaviors, knowing they can be viewed from the lens of the person causing harm
- The danger of identifying too closely with my work without recognizing who I am on my own



17

Close to Home

- Feeling so defeated when sexual harm happens to your child or a loved one
- Our kids and loved ones are not automatically buffered from sexual violence. Our desire to protect may not always be successful.

*"This sense of disconnect from self and community can be particularly jarring to us as feminists, activists, rabble-rousers, queer rebels, women's center staff. **After all, not only have we read the pamphlets — we've written them.** We feel we should know what to do when we're in violent situations. We feel we should know how to avoid those situations in the first place."* - Reina Gattuso

<http://feministing.com/2015/04/28/lets-talk-about-intimate-partner-violence-in-queer-communities/>



18



*"I am an advocate before I get paid." –
Carrie Nettles*



19

What is a "Normal" Childhood?

- Sleepovers? - Code word, practicing, checking in, prep and debrief
- My need to control what I can knowing that things can and do happen.
- I see the very rare cases, so I live with that lens
- It's hardest to separate when the clients are the same age as my kids
- You are THAT parent
- Needing a break, but not ready for others to step in to help



20

Partners

- Ongoing arguments due to my hypervigilant level
- I don't want to fight another battle at home
- When I was new to the field, I scared my husband with the scary, dark place I was in
- Partners not carrying the emotional load or not having the same concerns
- It's a huge positive that my partner believes and validates my concerns
- It was so helpful that my partner understood the odd hours. It helped that when I was home, I was really there.



21

Starting in the Field

- Hyper vigilant when new to the field
- My first months, I would consider myself unwell
- Spiraling
- Naive
- Impact of digesting dark content
- Living with claws out
- I came home not functioning
- "I never think that my family is safe"
- A huge relief to move from fear to hope after some time passed. I can do this AND I am aware.
- Roller coaster, but wanting to stay



22

Occupational Identity

"Occupational identity, even well managed, impacts every single part of the social experience."

"Burnout is the inevitable result of an unhealthy connection to the occupational identity."

Dr. Johnanna Ganz, Occupational Identity Researcher specializing in mission driven work, TED x at Hamline University on May 7, 2019,
https://www.ted.com/talks/dr_johnanna_ganz_when_it_s_more_than_just_a_job



23

Childcare and School

- How can I trust someone?
- Safety vs Convenience
- Exhaustion of being the only doing the reference calls, asking the questions
- Being accused of being paranoid. Questioning my gut.
- How do institutions treat me and my kids?
- I am not one to say, "Do everything the babysitter says..."
- Parenting is hard if you are invested in it
- Hard to navigate a world that isn't as concerned or aware



24

Pandemic Reality



- Pandemic was excruciating
- Educating during the pandemic was almost impossible
- The pandemic showed me that our culture doesn't support parents

<https://pixabay.com/users/educadorma-cosiv-588359/>



25

Self Care



"I'm sorry, what?"
 "There is a big difference between the language of self care and living it. Things are blowing up in one area and energy is needed to address the emergency while keeping other things intact."
 – Erica Staab

<https://pixabay.com/users/myriams-fotos-1827427/>

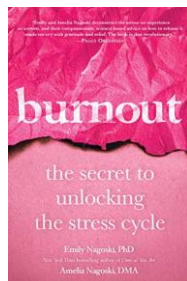


26

Community Care

"The cure for burnout is not 'self-care'; it is all of us caring for one another. So we'll say it one more time: Trust your body. Be kind to yourself. You are enough, just as you are right now. Your joy matters. Please tell everyone you know."
 — Dr. Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, DMA

Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle, 2019



27

Identity Matters

- The system is designed in a way that doesn't work for people of color
- Not prepared for the level of exclusion we faced when my child transitioned, including her school saying they weren't equipped for her to attend there if she lived her truth
- There is a language you are supposed to know if your child has a disability. Saying the same thing, but not being understood by practitioners
- If you are doing this work in a small town, there can be extra challenges in safety and privacy
- As a survivor and practitioner, I feel the risk for my kids



28

What are your challenges?



29

Joy as Resistance



"I didn't want fear to be my main motivation in parenting."

- Cherie Benjoseph



30

Buffers

- Good at navigating systems – but then I think of everyone trying to do this without the privilege that I have
- We understand complexities in lives – parenting and caregiving
- When I am confident it goes better. When I get in my head it doesn't work.
- More parenting strategies – trying every tool
- Strong value in how my child treats others
- Remembering why we do the work - dreaming of how things COULD be



31

Buffers

- When we are making a connection, we live in the moment
- Building the net of 5 adults
- Closing a physical door to the work
- Changing the "Search Warrant" shoes
- We don't do toxic secrets
- Supportive colleagues make a huge positive difference
- Value speaking to truth in a way connected with heart and feelings. Ongoing skill.
- We don't wait for their questions, we start. We create opportunities for discussion.
- Doing exceptional things (mountains, oceans..)



32

Buffers

- THERAPY
- Workplace flexibility is huge
- Learning to give myself grace
- Listening to listen, not going into fix mode
- When something bad happens, it is not the end of the world
- High expectation on how we treat others and how we deserve to be treated
- Music makes a huge difference in my mood and my outlook



33

Connecting

When a problem comes up...

"I don't ask 'What did you do?'"

I do ask, 'What happened?'" – Kelly Nicholson

We live a life of so many little conversations.



34

Actions

- Sweat/Physical processing
- Finish the stress loop
- Meditate
- Seeking out counseling
- Intentionally not mothering/parenting clients or co-workers
- Having time to process
- Stress naps
- Scheduling in reset/break/bathroom time
- Harnessing my anger – turning anger into good work



35

Actions

- Separate playlists – one for going to work and one for coming home
- Letting myself be sad – crying in the shower
- Keeping my phone out of my bedroom
- Learning how to say no
- Intentionally giving my kids freedom. I want my kids to learn to access help, listen to their gut, speak up..they can't do that if I am always there.
- Battling guilt for putting my needs on my planner. Time for myself should be the first thing that I plan.



36

Actions

- Don't wait for years to pass before making physical and emotional health a priority. If not for self, know you are modeling for your children.
- Reading – not anything work related
- Breaking the barrier to find a physical routine that worked took a lot of energy
- Intentionally tune in when coming home instead of tuning out
- Short and long trips to physically get away to recharge batteries
- Setting boundaries – after 5pm is family time



37

Understanding the Complexities

"I just show up every day and make space to hold people as they are." – Alicia Nichols



<https://unsplash.com/@joicekelly>



38

Assets

- They are used to tough stuff and that is ok
- We can carry hard stuff and joy and happiness
- Joy and Creativity as family strategies
- Being grounded by family who work outside of the field
- We are often the first ones to volunteer – which can be great or our kids may need some space
- All in when it comes to creating magic for them
- Letting go is learned and gets better with practice



39

Assets

- Less judgement
- I ask more questions. I understand context.
- I am blunt which doesn't always translate in Minnesota, but it can be very helpful.
- Awareness is greater as our exposure is greater
- I can be more proactive
- I understand a holistic approach taking in account behaviors and strengths
- Less stigma about getting help
- Empathy
- Humor as a strategy



40

Assets

- Communicate good things. Communicate joyful things.
- Nudging kids out of the house. I WANT them to travel and have carefree experiences.
- Allowing myself to dream about the way I want the world to be and then finding ways to make that happen
- Seeing hope and healing up close makes me realize that it is possible and that it is real
- Keep the friends who really get it close to you



41

Hard Truths

- I expect to be harmed as a person of color
- Worried there will be less people to understand the work as good people are pushed out
- It took leaving the work to realize that I had options to take care of myself. At the time, I was too deep in it to see another way.
- I am not seen as a resource or expert in my own community or in the places where my children spend their time.



42



Art by Susan Heath Ramsey




43

We see the world differently

"It happens when you take on the burden of other people's pain," explains domestic violence advocate and educator Julie Owens. "Working with traumatized survivors can cause trauma. Our coping mechanisms can get overwhelmed."

We bring it home as depression, anxiety or as connection.

<https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/when-domestic-violence-takes-a-toll-on-the-helpers>




44

In the Field



Leadership and the field in general need to make wellness a priority



We need to invest in training and build brain skills



There is such a normalization of excess drinking or other self sabotage behaviors as a profession



We deserve to be seen as whole people.




45

Who Forms Your Net?



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46

How do WE talk safety?



"Research has found that **children are more open** to our rules when those rules are around their **personal safety** and welfare, as opposed to when we set rules related to issues of personal taste. **Knowing this gives us an edge.** If the discussion of rules can tilt towards the risks, and the way the rules can help to ensure their safety, there is likely to be less resistance...."

"For us as parents, the challenge is to give them space to explore their autonomy, and keep them safe at the same time. A way to do this is to **invite them to set the rules** they need to stay safe. To do this, explain the risks and what you're worried about, then put it to them to come up with a rule that will address that."

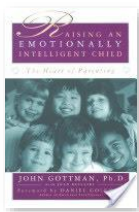
—Karen Young, psychologist and educator

www.heysigmund.com

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47

Empathy



"When parents offer their children **empathy** and help them to cope with negative feelings like anger, sadness, and fear, parents **build bridges** of loyalty and affection."

"Empathy is simply the ability to put yourself in your child's shoes and respond accordingly."

—John Gottman, PhD, "Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child"

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48

Kindness Is #1

- **73%** of moms surveyed by PARENTS magazine rated kindness as the most important value for parents to instill in their children
- Moms agree these traits are most likely to develop in their child as a result of living in the age of COVID-19:
 - A stronger bond with family (67%)
 - Resilience (36%)
 - Anxiety (33%)
 - Gratitude (33%)
 - Kindness (30%)



PARENTS 2020 Values Survey: May 13 – June 30, 2020 <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/kindness-is-most-important-value-parents-want-to-instill-in-children-topping-intelligence-and-strong-work-ethic-according-to-new-parents-survey-301148762.html>



50

Book Suggestions

"Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement"

by Dr. Kevin Gilmartin

"Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle"

by Dr. Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, DMA



51

Thank You to these colleagues

- Cordelia Anderson
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- Derek Cress
- Lindsey Florentine
- Mike Johnson
- Carrie Nettles
- Alicia Nichols
- Kelly Nicholson
- Erica Staab
- Ashley Sturz
- Patty Wetterling



52


#11forJacob

1. Be Fair
2. Be Kind
3. Be Understanding
4. Be Honest
5. Be Thankful
6. Be a Good Sport
7. Be a Good Friend
8. Be Joyful
9. Be Generous
10. Be Gentle with Others
11. Be Positive




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53



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54