

UNC World View
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 1 – Dr. Dana Griffin – Empathy and Well-being During COVID-19

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Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

CL: Hello, Dana. Hello to our listeners, and thank you for joining us during our inaugural episode of our podcast UNC World View Connecting Conversations. As an Associate Professor of Education at UNC Chapel Hill, Dana cares deeply about her students and also her service to the state by sharing her expertise at many past World View programs. Most recently, at Cabarrus County Schools, when we had a Global Education Summit with more than 150 teachers attending. Whenever Dana speaks that World View people end up coming up to her asking her more and more questions. And so I look forward to our conversation today, and specifically the strategies that Dana will share with our educators and families as we maneuver through these very uncertain times of COVID-19. So before we begin, and welcome, Dana, please share with our listeners your background and the type of work you're doing right now at UNC Chapel Hill.

DG: Hi, everyone, and thank you for having me on to discuss this very important topic and I hope that what I say can be useful to those listening. So, as you mentioned, I am an associate professor in the School of Education. I teach in the master's program in counseling and the undergraduate program in human development and family studies. I also conduct research around parent involvement in education and school, family, community partnerships. The main topic that permeates through my research and my teaching is the need to be culturally responsive and engaged in culturally relevant practices when working with families, schools and communities.

CL: And that is the reason we wanted you to be the first person on our podcast and this series that we plan to have continued past COVID-19 because we're always going to look at what the future will bring past COVID-19 as well. But right now we know educators everywhere in the world are retooling—jumpstarting new ways to deliver information to their students and the three questions I'd like to ask you today are things that keep coming up with in conversations that I'm having with people around the state both teachers and families.

So there's three questions that I'd like to just talk with you about today and learn from you. Number one, what signs can identify how people are coping. Number two, how can teachers take care of themselves and also serve as a support to their colleagues and to their students and to their families so they continue with their own sense of well-being. And three, what are some strategies that families can use to, you know, I call it like calming the waters with everyone in the house now as students transition to online learning and families are secluded in their homes, all together all the time. What are some strategies that you can share with us and then we look forward to putting any resources that you have on our website so that we

can share them out open source to anyone. So I'll be quiet and listen to some of the things that you're thinking as educators transition.

DG: So the first question that you want me to address. How can we tell if people are doing okay or not doing okay. How can we help our identify the signs that they are coping? So I want to begin by saying that first we need to acknowledge that we are all overwhelmed. All of us educators and families. For educators is a huge responsibility to try to continue teaching in an online environment, especially for teachers with no online teaching experience themselves and we have to acknowledge that. That's a big ask that we are asking them to continue to push out educational materials for their kids and then teachers have to do this on top of their own stress their own anxieties and their own fears that they may have

CL: Absolutely.

DG: And then families are overwhelmed, too, because they now have children at home all day and the onus of learning has been placed squarely on their shoulders. And parents also have the worry, anxiety, the fears that they are experiencing. And so it was a very overwhelming, the feeling that we face with all of that. And then, kids. Some kids, no longer have their basic needs met. Specifically, food insecurity. For some kids, going to school is a place of safety for them. And it was the only place where they were getting at least two meals a day. Breakfast and lunch. All kids are home, but some kids may be home alone, especially if their parents are deemed essential employees as well.

So even in the best of situations always being together can be very tough. We don't know home environments. We don't know what they're like. We just don't know what's happening. And even when things are going well and you never had any issue. It's a lot of stress to all of a sudden everyone be at home on top of each other. But we know people are resilient and they do cope with whatever is happening. We do know that, but what you specifically asked was how can we tell people are doing okay or not okay.

CL: It's really hard to tell how people are doing. And so if you can give us some tips to people always say, "Oh, I'm fine." Well, should we go a step forward and ask other questions or—? Any suggestions would be helpful.

DG: Right, so finding out of people are doing okay involves two things, and one just like you said you have to ask, "Are you okay?" And number two, we have to respond truthfully, so a lot of us will give the very flippant response that, "Yeah. We're doing fine. I'm, I'm okay." And we take that at face value, but we do have to dig a little deeper. You know what, this fine look to you. What are you doing at home? And one of the things that we have to remember is that people respond to their emotions and their feelings in different ways.

It's very easy to spot traditional signs of depression or anger or fear, but others can be hard to spot. For example, we may have someone that you know is very structured: they're up in the morning, they're cooking breakfast and they have

a structured day planned out for their kids. They prepare lunch. They have afternoon activities, family time, they do dinner; and on the surface it looks like they're doing fine, but inside. They can be suffering. So we do have to ask and everyone needs to be open and honest and also realize that it is okay to not be responding in the perfect way because there is no perfect way of coping. One of the things that we do have to realize is that there are negative ways of coping.

Our eating, our sleeping, drinking, social media, all of that may be on the rise. Right now we're eating more. We may be sleeping more, drinking more, engaged in our electronics and yes, those are ways of coping. However, we can't eat a lot and not exercise and sometimes if we sleep too much that can also be detrimental to our well-being, as well. So these are things that we do have to realize when we think about our people coping.

CL: And so my takeaway is make sure, number one, we ask, and number two, we're really good listeners when we ask not like, "All right, I'm glad you're fine." They have to dig a little deeper.

DG: And we have to be able to respond truthfully, "No, I'm not doing okay."

CL: Thank you so much. So when we, when we think about educators, teachers, instructors, school counselors, administration, administrators and also, parents, how can they take care of themselves? Are we all taking care of our own selves so that we can take care of our students? And so we can take care of our children? What are some ideas and strategies that you have about how people can provide self-care so that they can be effective with young people and teenagers?

DG: I think it's important that we have a mindset change. We have to let go of what our life has had taken away for right now and develop a new temporary normal. And we need to keep telling ourselves that this is indeed temporary. This will pass it may be a long time, but it will pass and we shouldn't expect anyone to make this jump without having any issues. And for those who can is great. And for those who can't it's also great, right? It is a new normal for us and we have to adapt to that.

With all of the resources that are out there with what is happening with pushing out educational materials to students so that they can keep learning, teachers are expected to keep teaching. The message that we're trying to send is that life can go on and that's true life can go on, but not as it used to be, again, it's a mindset change. This is a new normal. This is a new way of doing things. And that's what we need to keep telling ourselves. We have to change the way that we used to do things and develop new patterns of addressing what is happening.

CL: New healthy patterns. That kind of transitions into my third and final question, and that is what are some strategies that families can use to kind of talk about calming the turbulent waters at home that will eventually help students when they reengage to come out stronger? What are some ways that families can work right now in their homes?

DG: Right. As you mentioned and as I said before, there are so many resources out there for parents and for teachers. Our own UNC School of Education website has a very comprehensive list of resources that you could use as you adapt to your new normal. And I do encourage all of our listeners to visit that page. But right now I don't want to be another in a long list of experts, providing advice on how to cope and deal with what is happening. I do want to talk to your listeners as one parent to another, as one educator to another, on how to calm the turbulent waters and so my three strategies—as you use the other resources out there—to adapt are, number one, stop watching constant news and social media of what's happening, right? That does affect our mindset and we need to cut it off, disconnect. While your students may not show it, while you're your kids may not show it, they are listening and they do hear these stories.

And they already know that their lives are Topsy Turvy; they already know their lives are different and we don't need to give them these constant reminders of what's happening. And we ourselves do not need to hear constantly about how many new cases there are, how many deaths that we have from this, all day long. I'm not saying not to be informed, but my strategy is to choose one time on a day to get your updates, whether it's in the morning, in the afternoon or at night. Personally, \ for myself, I don't like to do it at night. Negative news is not the last thing I want to hear before I go to bed. So for me, it's in the morning, but you have to choose what's best for you. So that's my first strategy, turn off the news and social media, especially around coverage of COVID-19.

Number two, “Let it go!” Right from *Frozen*. I love it. Let it go. And I say this to mean, don't lower the expectations that you have. But you definitely need to change your expectations and you have to redefine what education and learning means, right? That's very important. What is education in this time? And what does learning mean in this time?

The last thing that I did in a face-to-face environment was I sat on a dissertation committee of a student and her topic was interviewing parents who decided to homeschool their kids. And one thing that came out of that is that they use this term that they called “unschooling.” And unschooling is taking away the structure of public schools and putting them in their own unstructured learning environment and that you're still learning. I didn't know [about that], but that resonates with me more today because of what's happening. We are now in this period of unschooling and our structure has to change, our expectations of what our students are getting have to change, and we can't stress out about it.

Even if you have the resources you want to make sure your student is not going to miss anything. Don't stress out about it. Our students will be okay. Everyone in this entire country, across the world, they're all facing the same things. They all know that there's this huge period of disruption in our lives. Great. Everyone! Everyone's graduations have the have been postponed, everyone's testing has been postponed, right? The AP test, the SAT test, GREs. Everyone is facing the same thing. We're all in the same boat. And so we can't really worry to such an extent that it's driving us crazy about what we're doing for our kids and what they're going to miss out on.

We also have to redefine and change our expectations about structure. For me, I let my son, get up in the morning. It is morning time. It's just play time. He gets on his Xbox and plays as games in the morning. He has lunch and then afternoon is exercise time and then late afternoon, early evening for dinners. That's his schedule. I let him define his schedule for me and I didn't put him on my schedule.

CL: How old is your son?

DG: He's 13 and in middle school.

CL: I've read and looked at a lot of research about the obvious value of creative play for younger students as well.

DG: Yes.

CL: Play is learning, right?

DG: Yes! Play is learning.

CL: We've forgotten that play is learning for adults.

DG: And that goes into my third strategy, which is spend time with family, the quality time. You can learn within that quality time. Plan a game of Chutes and Ladders for preschool and elementary school. It teaches them how to count, right? So you can do math within game time. Spend quality time with family. For me, I look at this social distancing as a gift, because my life was very hectic. All day long, seven days a week, we ran around from point A to point B to work to sports to games to whatever, and then we would go to bed and wake up and start all over again. And now we are forced to spend more time with family.

And this isn't going to last, so we need to enjoy it. Not look at it as something negative. Stop looking at what was in the past, that will come again, and enjoy where we are now. And I don't mean to say enjoy the tragedies that are happening, right? I'm not saying that at all. But because of that we are forced to now spend time at home and we need to make the most of it. It's okay to miss what is not happening. It's okay to miss sports events, the plays, the musicals, you know, the graduations are pushed back, it's okay to miss that, because that was important to us, but also enjoy the time to be with your family. And let your kids guide you in that too. It's not just what you want to do. My kids love Tic Toc. So we make Tic Tocs, like that's the thing, that's what they like to do, so we're going to do it. And we're going to have fun doing it. And you can make things fun; dinner cooking time, cook together, cleaning, exercising, dancing, reading to each other, whatever it is, just do it together. Even if it's just to sit on the sofa and you're all watching the same TV show. Finally, right? Do something together and enjoy the quality time. So those are my three strategies to deal with the turbulent waters that we are experiencing right now.

CL: Dana, I cannot thank you enough for sharing those strategies with us. We're all trying to find ways to cope and maneuver during COVID-19 and you've really helped us today. I'm sure you share with me that our collective hope is that students, and indeed all of us, will come out on the other side of this pandemic experience with a greater appreciation of family and friends, a world community and the value of empathy and caring for each other. So thank you again, Dana Griffin from UNC School of Education, for sharing your expertise with us on our podcast UNC World View, Connecting Conversations. And thank you listeners for joining us. Until next time, this is Charlé LaMonica for UNC World View. Goodbye.