

86 - Understanding Mental Health in Early Learners

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. And as always, we will be uploading a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development with new ideas for you to try. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for notifications about future episodes.

Dr. Shipley and I are so excited, honored, and privileged to have with us Willie Spears. And just short story, we both know Willie.

Dr. Shipley has known him for many years, and I've had the pleasure of knowing him now for about three years. And let me just tell you, the bio that he sent us does not truly show the amount of inspiration that he gives. So, you guys get ready.

Willie Spears has spent 20 years in education, as an administrator and a teacher. He was recognized as Teacher of the Year, and he's published 14 books, just 14. He's also a critically acclaimed speaker.

And let me just tell you, we're going to put his bio in the show notes, his website in the show notes. He's much more amazing than just those two sentences show. And I'll tell you, you're going to be inspired today.

You're going to be engaged. Willie, thank you for being with us.

Willie Spears: Thank you for having me.

I mean, I'm on the podcast with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Hield. Like this is bucket list. Some people want to go to Fenway Park.

Some people wish they would have watched Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, or Mike Tyson boxing or play basketball. And I was sitting in the corner saying, anyone can do those things. But can you get on the greatest podcast for early childhood education in the world? And for whatever reason, your other guests couldn't make it, and his other guests couldn't make it.

And I got in like the 15th alternate. So, thank you so much for having me. We love our hype man.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Well, Willie has been on our podcast before. He has also presented at our early childhood conference. And this summer, he is presenting at our early childhood conference as a keynote.

So, we will have that link in our bio. So, make sure you go and check out his presentation, because if you can see a live session of his or a recorded session that we have, you do not want to miss that. And then go back and try to find him in the podcast, because he has been here before.

So today, your session is something that's very important. And it's very serious. And I'm so glad that you wanted to bring this up.

And it is understanding mental health and early learners. And it is vital. And social media is playing a huge part in this.

But I want to know what you've seen out there, because you're out there every day in schools. Why is this topic important? And why did you choose it?

Willie Spears: One of my greatest joys is talking to early learners. My great-grandfather was the first African American to live in Panama City, Florida, where I'm from.

And I have the privilege of every month, I go share with an early childhood education class in our city. And in the month of February, Black History Month, I shared the story of my great-grandfather. And they were so excited, and they were so eager to learn more.

They remembered when I came back, what I talked about. And studying those young people, I learned more about mental illness than I thought I already knew. And so, for families, it's relevant, because parents are our first teachers.

So, parents need to understand that when you see things in your child that doesn't seem normal or natural, then there may be something going on that we have to pay attention to. For administrators, they're hiring these teachers. They're hiring the people that's going to make the difference.

When I was an administrator, we would use these four Cs, chemistry, calling, character, and competence, to hire teachers. But when it came to mental illness, we wanted to make sure they were competent in recognizing mental illness in their students. Instead of passing it off and being lazy and saying, this child won't pay attention, this child's not focused, this child is not the right person for my classroom, I need to put him in another classroom, or this child is just bad, and they misbehave.

That's the easy way out. The good teachers find a way to recognize the symptoms and do everything they can to make sure this child learns what they need to learn. Then, of course, the teacher is relevant for them because the teacher, will impact more lives in one year than anyone else will in an entire lifetime.

Students spend more time with teachers during their developmental years, than any other person. More quality time than they do with their mom and dad. More quality time than they do with their aunt or uncle, grandma, grandpa.

The teacher is that vital. So, the teacher must understand that mental illness is here and is here to stay. Mental health is important, and the classroom is much different than it was when I was an early learner many, many, many years ago.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: And I think, Willie, you say that spot on because it is so different from when we were younger. It's not the same. And the way our teachers taught, it's not the same today.

And we have to start seeing those things and picking up on them. You're exactly right.

Willie Spears: They see things they shouldn't see.

Early learners should be excited about Mickey Mouse, Spider-Man, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. They should be excited. We should have to say, calm down, calm down, and let's learn our ABCs.

Calm down, and let's learn how to get along with one another. But they know more TikTok dances than you do. You have a problem with your phone? Don't call the IT guy.

Call a four-year-old. They will help you with your phone faster than the IT guy. And so, this is not good, because these phones are introducing them to things that they're not ready to handle mentally.

And that's why we have to do a better job because, unfortunately, a lot of times at home, some parents are giving the device to a child. And the device is raising the child. And the child comes to us unprepared to handle mental health.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: 100%.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And that leads to such a relevant conversation, because you know what? It's not going away. So, we have to figure out how to give those good teachers, those tools, and those resources, and that mindset that we have to meet the needs of our new digital learners, our youngest new digital learners.

And on the flip side of that, we also have to educate the parents, on a way that we can proceed in society managing social media, managing technology. Willie, do you have any suggestions for, number one, our educators, and number two, our families and our leaders who are going to be also another component of our children's learning?

Willie Spears: Well, I think the first thing you said is key. It's not going anywhere.

So, we can't avoid it. We can't sweep it under the rug. It's here.

So, we have to manage. You talked about managing those devices and managing social media, and it's setting boundaries. You have to set boundaries.

I just don't believe a four-, five-, six-, seven-year-old shouldn't have a cell phone in their bedroom all night. First of all, physically, that light in their eyes is not healthy. The amount of time on that screen, they're not going to be able to focus when they wake up the next morning.

And then things we take for granted, like physical activity. Children do need to play outside. Healthy eating habits and quality sleep.

These things help when it comes to children's mental health. And then we have to teach them how to manage their feelings, because if they don't, they act out, and it's almost an excuse. Well, the reason I hit Sally is because I was mad.

Well, that's not appropriate. We have to teach you when you're mad, there's other ways to handle that anger. And so, my passion comes, I've seen so many adults who have mental health problems, that could have been diagnosed when they were four-, five-, and six-years-old.

But we act like it was just a boy being a boy, or a girl was just in her feelings. No, there's an issue here, and we have to have some key strategies and steps to help us. And one of those is, of course, like I said, physical activity, healthy eating habits, quality sleep.

And this sounds so cliché but loving them. Creating an environment conducive to learning. So, they should want to come to your classroom because it's a loving environment.

They feel safe there. They feel loved. And instead of being at home, where mom may be screaming at them and telling them, stop.

Or to a boy, you know how we are with boys. We have these biases. Suck it up.

Stop crying. You've been a little baby. You've been a sister.

So those things aren't helpful when it comes to managing the feelings of emotional health.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yep, that's 100%. All of this is spot on.

So, I know one of the things that we wanted to ask is why it's important to know the signs and symptoms. But is there anything that a parent or a teacher can look for that might be a sign or a symptom that they need help?

Willie Spears: Oh, yeah. And it's right in our face.

What's sad is it's right there, but we're too lazy to notice it. So, one thing that you can find in a kid, if a kid used to make good grades. I mean, this kid was doing good.

And all of a sudden, those things change. They're missing school a lot. They're really, really sad.

And the sadness lasts more than a day. We all have bad days as adults, early learners, middle school, high school. Everyone has bad days.

But if it's two weeks in a row, and Johnny's not himself, that's a sign of mental illness. If they've been withdrawing or avoiding social interaction, they're normally talking too much. And all of a sudden, they're not talking at all.

If they've been hurting themselves or hurting others, all of a sudden, they're very mean and they're being a bully. If they talk about death or suicide. If you have an adult and they come in and they're very comfortable talking about death and suicide, then that is a sign as well.

If they have extreme outbursts, you know, they just lose their temper every day. They throw things. They're screaming out.

They're hurting others. Or if they used to eat up everything. Snack time.

They want an extra bag of chips. They want an extra juice. And all of a sudden, they don't want anything at all.

Or if they have difficulty sleeping, or if you find out that they just aren't themselves. You can look at their countenance and you can tell, you know what, they have difficulty concentrating. They have difficulty doing the things that they normally do.

If this goes on for two weeks straight, then that's mental illness. They need to see help.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And I think right now in our society, I love the fact that you bring this up because we really do have to be as educators, as parents.

I mean, I can wear two caps to understand and relate to everything you're saying, right? We want to make sure we're observing our youngest learners and we're looking out for those signs and symptoms of mental illness. At the same time, we've got to look at this whole demographic of kids, right? And we have to talk about, we've got to have these hard conversations about mental wellness. And sometimes that's man accountability.

That's expectation. That's enabling. That's all those things.

So, I think you bring up a great point for our audience to consider. The signs and symptoms of mental illness, which we obviously want to, like Willie said, observe and be very serious about. But then we also got to have these conversations about mental wellness.

And I'll tell you, my 18-year-old still puts his phone on the counter. Why? Because everything that Willie said is absolutely true. And you know what? I pay the phone bill, so it goes on the counter.

I'm not his friend. I'm not. So, everything you're saying is just really a pertinent conversation for us as parents, as educators, as leaders to have, you know, this creation of these healthy environments.

And with that, what would you say our educators can create for healthy environments for our mental wellness overall?

Willie Spears: I believe the greatest teaching tool in any industry or organization, especially in education, is vulnerability and honesty. Imagine a classroom setting where the teacher sits in a circle, with the students and the teacher says, guys, some days I'm sad. Some days I'm angry.

Some days I don't feel like being here. But there's an appropriate way to express those feelings. See, if we model appropriate behavior, then the student understands what they need to do.

What happens is we're lazy and we don't model appropriate behavior. We're lazy and we don't talk about it because it's an uncomfortable conversation. But if we can admit it, if we can, like as a man, if I can admit I cry, that's like, whoa, you cry? Yes, I get sad, and I cry.

But I don't lash out on others when I cry. I don't hurt other people because I'm hurting. And so, an early learner, they may grow up in a household where when someone's angry, it's okay to use bad language.

It's okay to throw things. It's okay to break things. And it's okay to run away and slam the doors.

If they see that modeled, then they come to school. That's their norm. It's our job as educators to teach them.

It's natural to have feelings, even unhealthy feelings, but it's not appropriate to act on them. And so, I say the biggest thing is to be vulnerable and to model those behaviors and make sure that we're producing an environment, where they feel comfortable being their natural self, flaws and all. And we love them through whatever they're working on or whatever they're suffering with.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: So, and I know this is going to be different from state to state and family to family. But so, let's say they see these things happening with their child or a teacher sees it in the classroom. What is the next step? How can they help their child? Where should they go? Because I know that's a lot of people's issues also.

Willie Spears: a lot of people's issues. The easy answer is to seek counsel. And that's part of it.

But also, I think it would be smart for all of us to have positive role models, and other people that have the same values that we have. So, like, my wife and I, we have two children, Taylor and Kenneth. And just like you, Doc, we tell them that phone belongs to me, because I pay the bill.

You want to pay the bill? So that's how it's going to work. And so, as they've gotten a little bit older, we've given them a little bit more leeway, especially they've been working late. And Taylor's out of town right now.

So, of course, she has her phone all night. But what we let them know, we want other people, not just her parents, to have the same belief system as us. And when I'm talking about belief systems, I'm talking about mental illness.

We don't believe it's healthy for you to be on your phone all the time. We don't believe it's healthy, for you to call people names. We don't believe it's healthy for you to be rude and mean just because you're having a bad day.

So, one way to fix this is to maybe talk to other people, other parents that you trust and believe in, but also seek help. Like in Florida, we have life management. Panama City, Florida, there's life management.

And I've taken people there physically myself, to talk to life management counselors. And there may be a need for medication. I know that's a tough subject.

A lot of people don't like to talk about that. But we need to find a way to get a hold of this now so that that person, that little one, can become a healthy adult who contributes to society and doesn't drain from society because we didn't attack it when we saw the signs at an early age. So, I would say maybe medication but definitely counseling.

And ask someone at your school, is there someone here, a guidance counselor, a mental health professional, that my child and I can talk to about their mental health?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, Willie. Again, processing through with different caps on, and different lenses on, because ultimately, we know mental health during early childhood is the first start for our youngest learners to reach those milestones, right?

And we really, really want that start to be something that is healthy and is supportive of them learning and growing socially, academically, and mentally, right? Mentally, in the home, in the school, and all the environments.

So, as we wrap up today, can you leave our listeners with three takeaways?

Willie Spears: Oh, definitely, definitely.

And I want everybody, before I give my three takeaways, think about this as a journey. The goal is to get the early learner to graduate high school, and then become a healthy adult. Well, the way that you do that is I call it a GPS.

You have a goal-positioning system. You have a desired destination. And so that desired destination, you got to put that in your GPS.

And so mental health gets us off track. And so, we all may need to be rerouted sometime. And so, I want to encourage everyone to realize it's okay to be rerouted.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: I love that as a life lesson, too.

Willie Spears: Right. But it's okay.

So, I think we think we all have it all together. And none of us have it all together. At all.

I mean, I know Tisha thinks she has it all together, but most of us, we don't have it all together. So here we go. My three takeaways, and I think these are very important.

Number one, know the signs of mental illness in early learners. Know that if your child normally doesn't throw temper tantrums, and for a week straight, they've been acting different, that's a sign that there may be some mental illness issues. Number two, create an environment conducive to appropriate mental health.

That means create an environment where the child can mentally grow. I'm not a botanist. I'm not into planting plants, but I like to buy flowers for my wife.

And my mother-in-law loves a plant. But I know the environment has to be conducive for the plant to grow. The seed can't grow, if the environment around it has weeds and has anything that can hinder the growth.

So, we want to create an environment in our classroom, in our home, that this child feels safe to grow mentally. And number three, we have to have steps to improve mental health. So, it's not, we don't want to sit back and say, I don't need to do anything until I see a sign of mental health illness.

We want to say, even though I may not see a sign, my child may be quote-unquote normal, whatever that is, we want to say, we want to continue this path, of mental health by having steps to improve it. And that is appropriate sleep. This is not just for little children, but for grownups.

I'm telling you, at my age, a nap is my best friend. Like, I'm a professional napper. It's important.

So, sleeping. A lot of times, young learners, they stay up all night because of these devices. Limited their access to the devices.

Limited their access to staying inside all day. Make them go outside, and do something physical. They don't have to play a sport if they don't want to.

But just walk around outside. Play outside. Be outside.

Healthy activity outside. Sleeping and limited to devices or steps to improve mental health.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that.

I was talking to a little girl this week, and her mom and I are about the same age, and she said, you will never believe the crazy stories my mom told me about when she was young. She used to go outside all day. Like, from morning till night.

And I looked at her and I said, that was normal. And that was fun. So, they think it's crazy.

But anyway, okay, Willie, you have awesome ideas. And again, Willie will be at our conference this summer, so make sure you check out that link, in the bio. But I want you to leave us with one challenge.

Willie Spears: Okay, this is not going to be fun, but you asked for it. Are you ready?

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes.

Willie Spears: All right.

And pardon my language. But get off your butt and play with your child.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Okay. I like that!

That's my challenge. I was at a daycare center the other day, and I was in this classroom, and this little girl said, this is a true story. She says, my mom never plays with me.

She just sits on the couch and watches TV. This is from a 4-year-old. And so, we need to get up, go outside, and play catch, play hide-and-go-seek, play tag, make a lemonade stand, play hula hoop, play hopscotch, play jacks.

We need to get outside, and do physical activity with our children. This contributes to positive mental health.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I agree with you 100%. I'm just trying to take it all in because what you share with us is always so meaningful and important, and I know people are going to go back and listen to this again. So, Willie, thank you so much for being here.

You rocked it, as always, and we appreciate you.

Willie Spears: Well, thank you both so much for what you do. You're adding value to so many lives.

And the power of technology, this is going to outlive us all. So, it's going to help people for eternity. And what's even better is before the call, people didn't get to hear this, but you guys motivated me.

You guys were a positive word, of my bio, telling me how I need to write more. Now, we're so close that you guys said it like only a friend could say it. I need a hug right now, but I needed to hear that.

And so, I appreciate you guys humbling me with your sweet words of affirmation and a challenge. And I'm not going to tell you what they said because they're sweet ladies.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Willie, you're the best.

We appreciate you.

Willie Spears: Thank y'all so much. And keep stepping up your shoe game, baby.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Thank you. Bye, Willie.

Willie Spears: Bye. Bye-bye. Y'all be good.