

Matt (host): Welcome back to the Nimble Youth Podcast, where you explore the emotional lives of children and adolescents and help families build stronger connections in a complicated world. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. Today, we're talking about something that often goes unnoticed, but may be one of the most powerful influences on a teenager's mental health. The relationship parents have with themselves. The way we talk to ourselves, the way we handle stress, and the way we recover from mistakes.

All of these quietly shape the internal voice our children develop, the one they carry with them long after they leave home. Adolescence is a time when identity, self worth, and emotional regulation are under construction. Teens are constantly listening, watching, and absorbing how the adults around them respond to life, not just what we say to them, but what we say about ourselves. To help us unpack this, I'm joined by Ronnie Vehemente, licensed clinical social worker, a teen mental health expert and advisor to the MOOD Tools platform. Ronnie is the founder of The Family Room, a unique psychotherapy practice in the Los Angeles area focused on the challenges of parenting, marriage, and family life.

Ronnie has thirty years of experience counseling children, teens, new mothers, parents, couples, and families. She graduated from Columbia University School of Social Work, and Ronnie works closely with adolescents and families to help them build emotional resilience through practical everyday strategies. Ronnie, welcome to the podcast.

Ronnie Vehemente: Thank you, Matt. Pleasure to be with you today. Thank you for having me.

Matt (host): You bet. So let's start with the foundational idea that a parent's relationship with themselves becomes the template for their child's inner dialogue. Can you explain what that means in real life terms?

Ronnie Vehemente: You know, as you were saying earlier, you know, our internal voices become our children's voices. And the way that we speak to ourselves, the way that we cope with stress, the way that we regulate our emotions, the way that we just manage day to day life becomes a mirror of how our children would do exactly the same. And so, you know, in real life, you know, when parents' internal dialogue is like very kind and supportive, compassionate, respectful, So, this will directly shape our children's positive internal voices. And then, the opposite is true. So, when parents are self critical, harsh, judgmental, unkind to themselves, then our children will adopt like this very similar negative self talk.

So, it's like the inner critic versus the inner guide.

Matt (host): So, going on, staying on the idea of negative self talk, what are some examples that they may sort of absorb unintentionally?

Ronnie Vehemente: So if parents will say things about themselves like I'm stupid, nobody likes me, I'm fat, I'm ugly, I can't do this, I can't handle this. Then children will absorb that and then internalize it for themselves in their own kinds of ways when situations like that come up.

Matt (host): As we've covered on this podcast so much, it's a very important time, very formative time. But why is modeling self compassion so powerful during adolescence?

Ronnie Vehemente: Self compassion really promotes positive mental health, resilience, positive self worth, self love, and it quiets the inner critic and all of that sense of perfectionism and really dampens the possibility of depression and anxiety and just living in a world of such internal chaos. And so compassion just lends so much kindness and love to ourselves, which is what we want for our kids.

Matt (host): And I know raising children myself

Ronnie Vehemente: Yes.

Matt (host): Sometimes falling into this trap. But many parents, they worry that they have to get it right all the time. Right. But, of course, that's not realistic. We're all human beings.

We're fallible. How can parents model healthy self talk even when they themselves may be struggling?

Ronnie Vehemente: I think it's so important for parents to really check-in with themselves, like on a daily basis, like several times a day, and do whatever is necessary to regulate. And so I love this acronym called STOP. So S is like literally stop what you're doing, T, take a breath or 20, observe what's going on around you and inside you, and then P is proceed. So before doing anything to really check-in with yourself, take a moment and regulate. And sometimes parents are so overwhelmed that those regulation tools aren't easily accessible, or perhaps sometimes parents haven't learned as many tools.

And so what I love about the Mood Tools app is not only is it so valuable for teens, it's so valuable for parents. So MOOD is this free mental health app for tweens and teens that brings over 80 science backed mental health wellness strategies that are rooted you know in DBT, CBT, ACT that are directly at you know teens and parents fingertips and it's in partnership with child psychiatrists and educators, parents and teens and really helps kids and parents manage big feelings in real time. And you can also find a lot of these tools on their website mood.org. And so not only can parents teach kids all of these tools through the Mood Tools app, you can also learn them yourself and use them in real time. Letting your kids know that you struggle and that you're imperfect allows them to know that they can struggle and be imperfect and that there are ways to manage big emotions in real time.

Matt (host): The link to the Mood Tools app, in our show notes and our website, but, it's mood.org is the website.

Ronnie Vehemente: Yes.

Matt (host): Okay. Great. That's a great resource. Yes. So what are some simple phrases or habits that parents can start using today that might shift the tone of the house?

Ronnie Vehemente: So even things like modeling positive self talk, right? Even like the Mood Tools app, like doorway affirmations or like self love notes. So every time you walk through a doorway, you say something positive about yourself. And demonstrating all these tools in real time in front of your children holds so much power when your kids observe you doing those kinds of self regulating tools. Some of the other things are like connecting before you command or correct your children, like really connecting from an emotional place and understanding where they're coming from can really change the tone.

Things like understanding what's underneath a child's behavior rather than just looking at the behavior itself, like looking at what emotions are really motivating that behavior. And certainly seeing you repairing a rupture, like when there is a mistake that happens between the two of you, or that you make a mistake yourself or with your partner, between siblings, that they see you take a deep breath. Breathing exercises are so grounding and so self regulating as are, you know, like the grounding exercise five, four, three, two, one. Another beautiful tool through the Moods Tool app that can be used on a daily basis.

Matt (host): Right. That idea you know we often hear about self care but teens really benefit from it unless they can actually see it in practice see it happening before And their eyes so why is that visible self care such an important modeling tool?

Ronnie Vehemente: Yes. Yes. So, learn by doing, right? So, some what I like to reiterate are actually going back to the basics. So, in terms of like what self care can really look like.

So we're talking about good nutrition, good hydration, solid sleep, movement every day, going outside and feeling connected to the people that you love, I think are really important kind of basics. And then expanding from there.

Matt (host): Right. Right. And, you know, we often think, you know, self care involves, you know, going on a, you know, a two hour hike in nature or having a spa stay or something like that. But there are simple daily things that you can do that are really authentic self care tools, right?

Ronnie Vehemente: Yeah, yeah. And I think, you know, some of that really starts with loving yourself first in all the ways that it can look like and that self care as a parent is non negotiable. Because when your kids see that you really prioritize your self care, then they can do the same for themselves. And then families can support each other in taking care of each other's self care time. And one of my other favorite quotes in terms of self care is being who you want to see.

So if you want your children to be kind, compassionate, generous, resilient, patient, loving. You have to be those things first because kids can smell like hypocrisy like a mile away. But you know by modeling all those qualities and behaviors and coping skills, your children will do the same. And then when you be who you want to see, then it becomes an honor to see your

children become who they are. And also coming from a lens of curiosity of who your kids are, and like what I talked about before repairing the rupture and connecting before commanding.

And also like creating rituals that don't involve screens and really protecting connection time and points of contact with your kids by keeping screens away like during morning routines, meal times, in the car, bedtime, because kids are really seeking connection and creating a safe space for kids to feel like they can circle back no matter, you know, no matter the mistakes they make, that they always know that they feel safe and secure to come back to loving, calm, peaceful, respectful parents.

Matt (host): And so, electronic interface, a screen. Yes. I think that's very important to have, you know, FaceTime with your kids, not on a not on a, a phone but but actual FaceTime. Yes. Yeah.

So parents often ask and I know this again this is something that probably I was guilty of raising teenagers, but Okay. Should I talk about my own struggles Right. Or, you know, protect my child from them, sort of not let on to what I'm I might be going through? And and how do you find that balance?

Ronnie Vehemente: I think it depends on the age and your child's personality and temperament, right? Certainly as kids get older and as we're talking about tweens and teens, They get more structured age appropriate information, right? In moderation about certain things that are important in families or whatever questions the kids might have. But when it comes to like our own personal struggles, sharing like enough information without feeling like you're like the kids have to be responsible for taking care of you without over parenting them, without giving them that kind of responsibility. And so, you know, there becomes a balance between sharing the realness of how human we are and the challenges that we might be going through, but also demonstrating that we're capable of taking care of ourselves and also protecting children from information that they might not be able to emotionally or mentally handle.

And so I think that takes a lot of, again, curiosity and observation and just really knowing who your kids are and of course really coming from a place of self regulation before sharing.

Matt (host): Sure. Yeah. Do you have an example of that like what's an example of sharing something honestly, but still maintaining the the pain?

Ronnie Vehemente: So anything like I'm really like so overwhelmed with work right now. And I'm just gonna go take a walk or like a bath just to kind of learn how to just to kind of get some stress out and to feel more at ease.

Matt (host): Right, right. Yeah, just dealing with it constructively as opposed to

Ronnie Vehemente: yeah, yeah. Know, feels like

Matt (host): you have a drink or something, right?

Ronnie Vehemente: Showing them how you're managing, you know, the overwhelm and the stress.

Matt (host): Sure. So, you talked about creating intentional family rituals that support the, emotional wellness of the family. What are some of those rituals? What does that look like?

Ronnie Vehemente: Family meals. I think the art of a family meal has really decreased over time. I mean, I really encourage families to have dinner together if at all possible every night, but five times a week would be lovely. And again, any distractions, without any screens at the table. Right.

And really having genuine conversation. And so, for instance, like at my dinner table, we do this practice called rose, thorn, bud where we go around and we talk about our rose of the day something positive that happened. Thorn is something you know uncomfortable, painful, negative and then bud is what are you looking forward to tomorrow. And also other rituals like a gratitude practice whether that be again like a gratitude jar where everybody writes little notes of things that they're grateful for that can just pop in the jar and then at the end of the year you know, you can read through them and make a book out of them or something like that. An annual kind of trip or an annual kind of hobby or it can be more than just once a year. You know, again, that is truly about connecting and finding joy in something that you're doing together, and really appreciating just those small moments of family time.

And if you have older kids away in college, like having like a weekly FaceTime call to check-in, you know. Or again, just sending like a little note or like a little gift just saying, Hey, I'm thinking about you and I miss you and I can't wait to see you. When can we get together? I also love this practice of rather than a New Year's resolution coming up with a word of the year for yourself individually and for yourselves as a family. So again, that word can be your guide and your compass for the year and your anchor.

So again, what do you want to feel? What do you want to work on personally? That's your word of the year, like self confidence, right? And then as a family, what do you want to work on and prioritize as a family? Is it connection?

Is it adventure? Is it simplicity? So again, it's just something to anchor you and to guide you through throughout the year. I think again, it's something that you're working on together.

Matt (host): Right. So what's the real benefit or why should families work on things together as opposed to telling teens to sort of go work on themselves? Is the modeling aspect basically that that imparts Glen?

Ronnie Vehemente: It's absolutely modeling but also children seek connection. Right. We are humans we always seek connection. So again, our kids look to us for everything. They're

sponges, they absorb everything they see, hear, experience, feel. And so they look to us and we model everything.

Coming from a place of connection has so much more meaning.

Matt (host): A topic that we covered and one of our most popular episodes here had to do with achievement culture and the pressure that sometimes very enormous pressure that teens feel to perform, whether it's academically, socially. The role that social media has really sort of amplified that and even athletically, things like that. Why is it important to celebrate effort rather than outcomes?

Ronnie Vehemente: Again, it's all about growth mindset and letting go of perfectionism and unrealistic expectations and demands. I mean, our children are so bombarded and overloaded with performance, and they lose the joy of the process, and they become fearful and anxious of challenge. And we all know as grown ups that challenge is a part of life and challenge is an opportunity to learn and to grow. And so if we are only focused on the outcome, then we lose so many of the lessons learned on the journey. Growth isn't linear.

Growth is not a straight line going up. It can be very erratic, you know, when you reduce the pressure of performance, also reduce the anxiety attached to it. And then children can become so much more comfortable with challenge and so much more interested in what can I learn here, what is this trying to teach me, I can do this even though it's hard, putting in the effort, right, again process and progress over perfection, you know, outcome and also that you know we are not our failures and we are not our mistakes?

Matt (host): Helping them separate their identity from their achievements. Right? Yeah. Yeah. What about feeling what about the role of failure?

I mean, often say that, you know, failure is fundamental to growth

Ronnie Vehemente: How and to

Matt (host): do you help kids reduce their own fears of failing?

Ronnie Vehemente: Certainly, again, as parents, by modeling that ourselves and that when children make mistakes or that when we make mistakes to give ourselves grace and self compassion. You know, that we, including our children, are not their failures and not their mistakes and rather, or even just their successes, right? Rather they are loved and valued and seen unconditionally because they matter simply by existing. And again, that is through our internal dialogue and the ways in which we talk to our kids when they're having struggle. Again, acknowledging the frustration of not being able to achieve something in the way that they hoped, but then also trying to come up with solutions about how to manage the frustration and also to see things in a different kind of way and that there are other alternatives.

Matt (host): I just want to ask you about how teens can build intrinsic motivation, you know, there are all these external markers, things that they are, they hope to achieve, but how do you cultivate internal motivation? I know a lot of kids, for instance, they'll, they'll, they'll meet these, these marks of achievement in high school. Then they'll go to college and kind of fall apart because they find that they don't have those external markers of motivation when they when they are forced to sort of find it within themselves they find that it's not there. So what are some ways that they can we can help them as parents develop intrinsic motivation?

Ronnie Vehemente: Yeah, I think you know as parents our role is to acknowledge and validate and reinforce their value outside of performance, whether it be grades or athletic prowess. You know, it's about who you are, how you show up for people, how kind and loving friend you are, how generous you are, like in the little day to day moments. So like as a parent every day saying like I noticed when you took out the trash for me when I didn't ask that was really kind of you. Or I really noticed that you kept going with that math problem even when you were frustrated. So I noticed are two words that I love using as parents.

And again being very specific with what it is that you notice that it's not a general good job or you know that children just don't get rewarded when they get good grades. Just don't get rewarded when they win first prize, right? They get rewarded and loved simply by being and existing and just being who they are. Yeah.

Matt (host): And in closing, if there's one message that you hope parents might take away from our conversation today, I know it's hard to pull one out right but put you on the spot, if there is one, what would that be?

Ronnie Vehemente: We narrow it down to one.

Matt (host): Yeah. And that's fine. We'll do a a compendium of of, you know, of reflections. Put it that way. Right?

Ronnie Vehemente: This is kinda how I I try to live by the following. Take care of your body, mind, heart, and soul. Do what you love. Be with who you love. Speak up, show up, look up, look in, live now, love always.

Matt (host): Thank you so much for joining us today and giving us your insight again the app that you're involved with is called tools right?

Ronnie Vehemente: The new app.

Matt (host): Yeah And if you're in Los Angeles area, you have a website there as well for, for people to visit.

Ronnie Vehemente: Yep. [Familyroomla.com](http://Familyroomla.com).

Matt (host): Great. And we'll link both of those in our show notes. Thank

Ronnie Vehemente: you so much.

Matt (host): So today, today's conversation reminds us that parenting isn't just about guiding our children. It's also about tending to our own emotional lives. When we speak to ourselves with patience, compassion, and honesty, we give our teens permission to do the same. Thank you for listening to the Nimble Youth Podcast. If this episode resonated with you, please share it with another parent, educator, or caregiver, and consider leaving a review to help, more families find these conversations because the way we care for ourselves teaches the next generation how to care for themselves.

Until next time, please take care of yourselves and the young people in your life.