

Northwest Views: Care and compassion for every member of the family

By DiAnne Mueller

Parenting is never easy, and it's not your imagination if it seems like it's gotten harder recently. Loneliness, remote work, homeschooling, and major world events have combined to create a mental health crisis among children and adults that we are just starting to understand.

In 2020, when COVID first hit, we went home and thought we'd be back in a few weeks. Instead, we've been subjected to a roller coaster of ever-changing rules and guidelines for almost two-and-a-half years.

Children may have experienced the same confusion and isolation as adults, but in a way that is unique to their developmental stages. They may have been worried about family members, and they may have been bored or angry because they missed their friends.

As children get older, connections with friends become incredibly important. They start to identify with their peers more than they do with their parents. They get their validation from each other. It's a really important time in their lives, when they are figuring out who they are and how they fit into the world. That has all been upended by the challenges of the past two years.

What I'm seeing with clients – and in my own life

– is that we are all on edge. We have less capacity to cope, less ability to self-soothe. It's important to have an awareness that everyone feels this way right now. It's also extremely helpful to have compassion and understanding with the people in your life.

Here are a few suggestions for helping children and teenagers cope with their difficult emotions:

- Let your children know on a regular basis that you want to know what's going on with them. Counselors hear all the time that kids don't want to worry their parents. Make the effort to let them know you're there to help with anything that's bothering them, and normalize talking about emotions by sharing your own.
- Children need strong connections and relationships, just as adults do. Mister Rogers often told kids to "look for the helpers," and this has never been truer. Remind them they can talk to school counselors and other adults they trust.
- Consider placing limits on screen time – phones, television, social media and gaming. Encourage them to have face-to-face social time with groups of friends, which is a far richer experience than online interactions. Encourage their participation in activities where conversation can flourish, and

friendships can grow.

- If you need professional help, seek it out. We have a program at ECH called Family Solutions for Kids (FSK) that can help with family therapy, individual therapy, parent education, educational advocacy and support, communication skills training, child development education, and more.

One of the most important people you can show compassion toward right now is yourself. I always remind those I work with that they do not have to be perfect... just good enough is a high bar when it comes to parenting! An added bonus is that you're modeling good behavior for your kids at the same time you're caring for yourself.

Know that you are not alone. We are all in this together, and ECH is here to help.

Eve Dyson is Director of Family Connections at Every Child's Hope.

The opinions expressed in this column are the columnist's alone and do not reflect the opinion of the owners or staff of *Community News*.



\$1 million in additional financial assistance available for Ameren Missouri customers

With inflation causing more households to feel a financial pinch, Ameren Missouri has added \$1 million to its Clean Slate fund, a program that helps eligible moderate-income customers clear their past-due balances and start fresh.

"The Clean Slate program has been highly effective, helping thousands of families who often don't qualify for state and federal assistance," said Tara Oglesby, vice president of customer experience for Ameren Missouri. "We are excited to donate this additional \$1 million to offer more customers a path to get back on track. We hope to alleviate some of the financial strain many families are currently navigating while helping them stay cool and safe in the summer heat."

Ameren Missouri recently expanded Clean Slate eligibility and introduced an even lower payment threshold to further support customers. Customers are now required to pay just 10% of their past-due balance rather than the previous 25% participation requirement, and the Clean Slate program will cover the remaining overdue sum.

To be eligible for Clean Slate, customers must meet the following requirements:

- Household income up to 300% of the federal poverty level.
 - For example, customers in a four-person household with income up to \$79,500 annually are eligible to apply.
- Pay 10% of the past-due balance.
- Experiencing financial hardship.
- Have an active Ameren Missouri electric account that is past due, on a payment agreement or in need of reconnection.

Customers are encouraged to apply as soon as possible to a community action agency before their balance becomes unmanageable and funds are exhausted.

Those local agencies, spread across Missouri, administer the Clean Slate program and determine eligibility. A full list of administering agencies is available at AmerenMissouri.com/CleanSlate or by calling Ameren Missouri at 800-552-7583.

Ameren Missouri has previously pledged more than \$5.4 million to the Clean Slate program, including a new fund this year specifically for natural gas customers.

In addition to the Clean Slate program, other assistance programs can help customers save money and manage their bills, including:

- **Keeping Current:** A payment assistance program that helps customers make paying their energy bill more affordable. It includes a monthly bill credit, along with help to reduce the total amount the customer owes.
- **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP):** A federally funded program that assists customers with an income at or below 60% of the state median income level to pay their energy bills.
- **Weatherization:** A program for income-eligible homeowners and renters to make qualified, energy-efficient improvements to a home, including caulking, water heater jackets, weather stripping and insulation.

Clean Slate participants are often eligible for more than one assistance program. For more information about energy assistance options, visit AmerenMissouri.com/EnergyAssistance.

Thank you for reading the
COMMUNITY NEWS



HOOD'S
Automotive

Full service automotive
maintenance and repair

AAA Approved
NAPA Auto Care Center

Celebrating
50
years
in business!

198 NW Industrial Ct., Bridgeton, MO
314-739-4611
www.hoodsauto.com

KEEPING CARS ON THE ROAD SINCE 1972