

not to pretend everything is OK.”

Talking to kids about money problems can be tricky because telling little ones too much can cause anxiety. Figuring out how to keep children from worrying and keeping the family focused on the positive is just one more challenge families face during this economic squeeze.

Big impact

The economic crunch is a disaster “really no different to some people than a flood or explosion or 9/11,” according to Mike Conner, a psychologist with a private practice in Bend. “It’s just as stressful.”

The economy impacts families in obvious ways, like home foreclosures, according to Coontz. But it also affects them in other ways. Marital conflict increases during economic downturns. Also, parents are more likely to use harsher forms of discipline on children, Coontz said, because stressful economic situations increase the pressure parents feel and this, in turn, can exacerbate problems and tension within families.

“Insecurity really adds to stress,” Coontz said.

She explains it this way: We all have negative interactions with our spouses or children. In normal times, we work to smooth out those times with positive interactions. Now, stressed-out parents aren’t offering as much praise to kids because they are preoccupied. And when kids annoy them, parents snap at them.

Maryland social worker and psychotherapist Tracye Polson says parents who are stressed out lack emotional availability for their kids. This makes them edgier or more impatient. Kids are more likely to say “Mommy!” 10 times before getting a response, for example.

Smaller shifts

Redmond resident Barb Lochner has changed some of her home-schooling practices because of the economy. She used to send her six children, who range in age from 2 to 16, to classes at the Bend Science Station, but not this year.

The older ones, who have part-time jobs, know that they are now responsible for more of their own expenses. And she’s talked to her younger children about cutting back on extras. For instance, instead of going to the pizza parlor, they might eat pizza at home.

Bend mom Liana Ottaviano was never an extravagant spender. But in 2001, she had to take her thrifty shopping skills to an extreme. Her husband lost his job, and soon thereafter, she lost hers as well. Ottaviano gave birth to their daughter in

Corky Senecal, director of housing and emergency services with NeighborImpact, which offers help to those needing emergency housing, energy or food assistance, has seen more people asking for help this year. “The economic situation is moving up and up and up the economic ladder,” she said.

She offered the following information:

- Winter is typically the busiest time of year for requests for emergency food assistance, yet July 2008 was the busiest month the nonprofit has ever seen, and each month since then, the number of requests has increased.
 - Across the board, at least 30 percent of those seeking assistance are doing so for the first time; this is a much higher percentage than is typical.
 - Approximately 200 people a month have been applying for rental assistance; NeighborImpact is typically able to help fewer than 30 households a month.
 - An overwhelming majority, about 75 percent, of the households seeking assistance include children.
 - In June, about five people each month attended NeighborImpact’s foreclosure prevention classes; now the nonprofit sees about 10 to 20 clients a week.
- Julie Lyche, director of the Family Access Network, which works within the schools to help connect local families with aid, says her organization has also seen an increase in need. In particular, this is the first year she recalls receiving requests for help paying mortgages.
- The group helped 2,289 people in the first quarter of the 2008-09 school year, a 13 percent increase above the first quarter of last year.

— Alandra Johnson, The Bulletin

early 2002 while they were both out of work.

They survived just fine, but the experience challenged Ottaviano to find ways to stretch her budget. They were still bringing in a fair amount of income from unemployment and side projects, but the anxiety of being unemployed and looking for jobs kept her attentive to the family budget.

She started getting her hair cut at a local beauty school and shopping for clothes exclusively at garage sales and consignment shops. Even after they found employment, they kept those budgeting practices in place.

Now that the economy has turned sour, Ottaviano sees more local families also choosing to adopt more frugal methods.

"Everyone's kind of concerned. Now it's at the forefront of everyone's mind," said Ottaviano.

Talking about it

Many parents don't talk to kids about financial issues, according to Anita Gurian, New York psychologist and editor of AboutOurKids.org. But "we owe kids the basic truth. You can't ignore the situation," she said.

Kids will pick up on changes within the household. The key is to be honest without giving them more information than they need.

"There's a fine line between being honest and making them scared," said Gurian.

Steven Curtis, a child clinical psychologist from Antioch University in Washington, says most younger children don't necessarily know what's going on, but do notice changes in their family.

Parents should keep in mind that kids are unlikely to tell adults they are feeling anxious or stressed. "Kids don't say, 'I'm stressed out.'" Instead, they might show stress by being afraid to go to school or being more clingy.

Kristan Leatherman, California author of "Millionaire Babies or Bankrupt Brats?" believes it is important to give children information about the problem.

"Kids are great perceivers, but poor interpreters," she said. They will notice something is wrong, but then assume it is their fault.

She says parents need to base their message on what kids will understand: "We can't afford it" means nothing to a 7-year-old." Instead, she suggests saying: "I choose not to spend our money on this today because we have less."

As kids grow older and enter high school, parents can talk to them about delaying gratification. Leatherman suggests parents show them their bills to help them understand the difference between needs and wants.

When parents do talk to kids about making a sacrifice, they have to be prepared for their kids' reactions. Polson says parents need to be able to tolerate kids' feelings of disappointment without chastising, becoming angry or retaliating with criticism, which can make kids feel they are at fault. Instead of snapping at them, parents can say things like "I'm sad, too; I liked it when you did that, too" or "It makes sense that you want this; we're upset, too."

Turner thinks her 9-year-old daughter Calista has started to understand that things have changed. She has to tell Calista "no" while shopping and that certain things are not in their budget. "She accepts it; she doesn't like it," said Turner.

Before this, Turner thinks her daughter simply assumed that you went to the bank and took out money from the ATM. She didn't realize that first you have to put money in. While Calista understands that her family's situation has changed, Turner says she is careful not to tell her too many specifics. She tries not to discuss her concerns with her daughter because she doesn't want to make her overly worried.

Lochner talks fairly in depth with her older children about the current economic conditions. She sees it as a learning opportunity for them. She also talks to her younger children, although in more general terms. She thinks this is important so they understand what's happening and don't think it was a chance occurrence. Plus, she says, their imagination is usually far worse than reality.

"It's a really good lesson for our kids; unfortunately, it's a hard one," said Lochner.

Parents' approach

Conner believes sometimes parents should be cautious when talking about problems with children because it can trigger stress. He suggests saying things like: "We have decided to save money" or "We have decided moving may be a good thing" or "We believe this is the best thing to do."

He believes children should have a voice, but should not make decisions.

"I don't think you should be telling children scary things they can't understand or do anything about," said Conner.

Most importantly, all of these messages should include the idea that the family is going to be OK.

Some parents end up confiding in children because they don't have anyone else to turn to, and that is a mistake, says Conner. It happens because parents are lonely and need to hear their own thinking on an issue. But it can create big problems.

When parents tell Conner they have an "open, honest relationship" with their children, he thinks, "That's not the way to go."

Polson believes it is crucial for parents to take care of themselves emotionally. They should turn to friends, family members or professionals for help.

Jason Edwards, a New Yorker, who wrote a series of books to help kids cope with anxiety, agrees that parents have to deal with their own anxieties. One step is for families to focus on helping others. Charity work can make people feel good and give them a sense of purpose.

Resilience

Resilience is a word for the inner strength that helps some people come back from tough situations. And it makes a huge difference in how families will recover from setbacks.

Gurian says parents need to focus on the positive: "We're a family, we're together, we're going to deal with this."

Coontz thinks kids benefit from hearing a historical perspective. Families in the past, particularly in the Great Depression, went through incredibly difficult times. First, people looked for someone to blame and envied those who still had more than they did. After that, Americans learned to pull together to get through. She hopes families today can focus on the value of bonding together. While families may have to make sacrifices, they should also hear the message that "we can

pull through.”

Coontz believes pulling together to help is “tremendously empowering for kids.”

Instead of focusing on who is to blame for the situation, Conner believes parents need to adapt “to what is, rather than being upset about what isn’t.”

He also thinks facing adversity helps children build resilience.

Having friends around can also help, according to Conner. While many families tend to isolate themselves when they are struggling, that is actually counterproductive. Having people over, including kids’ friends, can help boost spirits. In turn, families who are not struggling as much should reach out to friends who are.

Curtis thinks families can benefit simply from hanging out together. Parents just sitting and playing with their children can help little ones feel more relaxed and give them a chance to talk. In addition, Curtis thinks families should try to stick to a routine of sorts because this also helps kids feel reassured and secure.

Polson suggests families focus on one activity that brings them together, maybe having dinner together each night or playing football as a family.

Benefits?

“There are a lot of positive things that can come out of this downturn,” said Gurian.

Families may learn to spend more judiciously or may grow closer through shared sacrifices. “In the long run, I think there’s an opportunity for growth,” she said.

Coontz sees a silver lining from people gaining a better sense of the collective whole. “We may not all be in the same boat, but we’re all subject to the same tide.”

Lochner says her family benefits from trying to help people who are in trouble. “This is the time you step up.”

In the home-schooling community, Lochner finds that having less money available has made the families come closer together and rely on each other for more, whereas before, they might have gone to outside sources.

“It pulls you together more as a community,” said Lochner.

Curtis also sees a bright side.

“The majority of us are going to get through this. It’s a great time to teach kids about money,” he said. “Good things are on the horizon.”

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