

# Tips in a Time of Economic Crisis

## Talking Dollars and Sense With Your Children



Almost half of Americans report that stress has negatively impacted their family life, and more than half blame stress for fights with the people closest to them. Nearly 10 percent of married couples link stress to divorce or separation.

Today's economic downturn heaps even more stress on parents with children or teens living at home. With rising numbers of foreclosures and evictions, mounting unemployment, and ever-increasing costs of living, the stress of juggling family needs has never been greater. The potential negative effect of this increased stress on our families and our children is critically important.

We need to be aware of how our own stress gives rise to the stress experienced by our children, and we need to be prepared to help them. Research shows that stress affects learning and behavior. Additionally, stress can affect the immune system, leaving our children susceptible to acute and chronic illnesses both now and in later life.

Ref: American Psychological Association, 2008.

Many Americans report heightened levels of stress during this time of financial crisis. Yet, few realize that this reaction to economic pressures closely resembles the psychological effects experienced after natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, or even the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Stress reduction and mental health promotion are as important now for people affected directly or indirectly by the financial crisis as for those who suffered from effects of natural or man-made disasters.

### You Should Know

While we try to shield our children from financial problems and the economic crisis, they hear, see, and read about what is happening in the world, the nation, and in their own homes. Despite our best efforts as adults, our worries can become their worries. Our stress can become their stress. Part of our responsibility as parents or guardians is to help our children deal with the stress that they lack the understanding or ability to manage on their own.

### Signs of Stress in the Young

Children respond to stress in many different ways. However, because certain signs are common at particular ages, adults can recognize when children are under stress and respond appropriately.

Children respond to stress based on both their developmental level and their perception of family reactions. Often, the most significant indicator of stress is a *change* in a child's behavior, not the behavior itself.

*Ages 1 to 5:* With few coping skills, very young children have a hard time adjusting to change and loss. They must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times. Very young children often regress to an earlier behavioral stage when under stress. Preschoolers may resume thumb sucking or bed wetting. They may cling to a parent or become very attached to a place where they feel safe. Changes in eating or sleeping habits, hyperactivity, or unusually aggressive or withdrawn behavior may indicate the presence of stress in young children.

*School-age Children:* Those aged 5 to 11 may react to stress in many



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of the same ways as their younger counterparts. Signs can include regression to behaviors from earlier ages. They also may withdraw from friends, demand more attention from parents, act aggressively, or find it hard to concentrate. Some may complain of physical problems—headache or stomachache—without obvious cause.

*Adolescents:* When under stress, youth in the 12 to 14 age range often have vague physical complaints. They also may abandon schoolwork, chores, and other responsibilities. Many withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive, or begin to experiment with alcohol or drugs.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities or to contribute to solving the causes of the family stress. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions.

### **How To Help**

Reassurance is key to helping children cope with stress. To the extent possible, maintain a normal household routine; encourage children to participate in activities at home and in the neighborhood. Very young children need a lot of cuddling and verbal support. Take the cue from older children about hugs and holding hands. But whatever their age, be honest; answer questions with age-appropriate responses and understandable information, whether it's about scaling back a birthday party or finding ways to pay for college in a year or two.

Listen and respond. Talk *with*, not *to*, them. Don't let financial or job issues take over family time. Don't dwell on details that may frighten a child or unduly upset a teen. Be frank and encourage children and teens to express their feelings in conversation, drawing, writing, or painting. Help them understand that their emotions are healthy and normal. Gently correct any misunderstandings they may have about their situations.

Don't forget to take steps to safeguard your own health. Model healthy stress-relieving behaviors and be proactive about managing your family's stress. Finally, if stress levels in the family become overwhelming, it's not a sign of weakness or failure to seek outside help for one or more family members.

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## Helpful Resources

### SAMHSA's Health Information Network

Toll-free: 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español)

Web site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

### Treatment Locators

#### *Mental Health Services Locator*

Toll-free: 800-789-2647 (English and Español)

Web site: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases>

#### *Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator*

Toll-free: 800-662-HELP (4357) (24/7 English and Español)

Web site: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

### Hotlines

#### *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*

Toll-free: 800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 800-799-4TTY (4889)

Web site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

### Other Resources

#### *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

Web site: <http://www.nctsn.org>

#### *National Association of School Psychologists*

Phone: (301) 657-0270

Toll-free: 866-331-NASP

Web site: <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT>

#### *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists*

Phone: (202) 966-7300

Web site: <http://www.aacap.org>

*Note: This list is not exhaustive. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

## Family Talk About Economic Stress

- Become a family “team” that works together to solve problems.
- Have family meetings to talk about money concerns.
- Include all children in family decisions, even if they don’t really understand. Just being there is important for them.
- Help children learn about budgeting and the difference between *needs* (“must haves” like food and housing) and *wants* (“nice to haves” such as DVDs or a new toy).
- Talk about a team approach to saving money and identify ways that everyone can help the family cut expenses. Even young children can help and feel useful by doing such things as remembering to turn off lights.
- Identify and plan no-cost activities together: take a family walk, play a board game, or go on a bike ride together.

