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The impact of the economic crisis on the family

In many cases, our nation's economic struggles significantly affect families in a manner similar to the dramatic effects of natural disasters. Unemployment is on the rise, those who have jobs worry about losing them, and way too many retirement plans and savings accounts have all but disappeared.

Many parents, with good reason to be concerned about their ability to put food on the table, pay a mortgage and send their kids to college, have become anxious, distressed and depressed.

Focused on their own serious troubles, caregivers may fail to understand the impact of the economic crisis on their children. Children do not live in a vacuum. They are sensitive to problems and acutely perceive familial stress. Parents, feeling pressure in the workplace, must be cognizant that their stressors are easily transmitted to their children, compounding difficulties within the home.

Children depend on their parents for safety and security and are likely to adopt their parents' fears and worries when they hear discussions related to unemployment, dwindling funds, home foreclosures or when viewing displays of parental insecurity. Thoughtful explanations, however, can help relieve children's anxieties and confirm a sense of parental and personal control.

Caregivers' explanations should describe what is happening in our country and the world in a manner that provides both information and a sense of hope. Discussions should be age-appropriate and generally reassuring. Let children know that plans are in place for both their family and their country and that the family is safe and secure.

With younger children, the explanation can be positive but vague, increasing in specifics with age and maturity. As well-founded as they might be, do not share your deepest adult worries with your school-age children.

Make an effort to spend increased quality time as a family. Engaging in positive family activities is likely to reduce parental stress as well. Eat meals together, play games and reduce time spent watching television.

If children ask concerning questions regarding something they have seen or heard, honestly explain what happened and discuss, in a positive way, the

effects of the event. Without a parent's perspective, a child's ability to understand cause and effect could be compromised.

Encourage your kids to talk about their lives and to share their accomplishments, worries and concerns. Ask them about friends and school. Make this an opportunity to learn who they are and show them how important they are to you. Most significantly, make certain they feel loved.

Learn to recognize signs of childhood stress and respond before they become ingrained and lead to significant behavioral problems. Young children may display vague symptoms, including fear, anxiety, excessive crying and irritability.

School-age children may act out their fears in an attempt to gain control, becoming hostile and aggressive or developing a need to stay at home and avoid school. Teenagers may display a combination of the above symptoms, as well as displaying adult anxieties, sleep problems and depression.

Remember, each child is unique. Some have special needs that may impair their ability to understand and respond to major crises, while others exhibit resiliency and coping skills necessary to address even the most difficult situations.

As parents and caregivers struggle to maintain a strong sense of family in these rapidly changing economic times, it is important that you recognize that yours is a difficult task shared by many. You are not alone in your efforts to be positive role models or to ensure the safety and security of your children. If you observe signs of stress in your kids or are unable to cope with familial stresses of your own, seek the help of your pediatrician or other knowledgeable advisor.

A number of references are available from the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org or send questions to ebailey@aap.org.

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