

## Families Taking Charge: Helping Children Cope

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### Introduction

Losing a job affects all members of the family. Adults frequently become so preoccupied they forget unemployment has an emotional, as well as financial, impact on their children. Children depend on their parents for emotional security. When parents are tense, upset and inattentive, much of this security is gone.

Unemployment can mean sudden lifestyle changes for the entire family. There's less money to spend, so decisions must be made on how to spend what's there. It may mean other family members must find jobs. It may mean there is less family time while looking for a job.

Unemployment can mean a parent is home more, which might call for adjusting schedules and space. It may involve moving. Whatever change unemployment brings, the family system and all its members feel the impact. Discussing these feelings and concerns is important.

### Family Communication

Communication has two parts -- talking and listening. Each must occur for communication to be successful.

As people undergo changes in their lives, they need to talk about it. This includes adults and children. Harvard psychologist Gerald Kaplan says people who are not ashamed to express fears, anxieties, sorrows and seek help from others deal with crisis most successfully. Children who learn this at a young age will be more likely to be able to cope with stress as adults.

Being able to discuss and vent angry feelings can help keep those feelings from creating more

severe problems, such as emotional problems, family violence or alcohol abuse.



Listening is as important as talking. Everyone needs someone to listen to them -- someone who supports them and allows them to openly express feelings. Sometimes a person can find a solution or discover the sources of stress just by talking.

The listener should not feel obligated to advise, analyze or have all the answers. Listening and responding with concern and understanding may be all the help needed.

Open communication within the family is vital to good relationships. During stress, we frequently need people outside the family willing to listen when we need to vent our feelings. In some families, listening is difficult because we want to help but have strong feelings and opinions. Also, family members are sometimes too busy or preoccupied to listen well. Taking the extra effort to actively listen is important.

### Communication Tips

- Be sensitive to non-verbal communication. Clenched fists, fidgeting, eye movements, and other body language can suggest totally different meanings for what is said.
- Share your feelings with "I" statements. "I" statements build trust in the relationship. They give you ownership for what's said. The model for this type of communication is:
  1. Begin: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_"
  2. Name situation: "when \_\_\_\_\_"

3. Tell how you are affected: "because \_\_\_\_\_"
4. State what you would like to see in the future: "from now on, please \_\_\_\_\_."

An example might be:

"I feel angry when I get home and find the dishes undone because it makes the place look so messy. Would you please put the dishes in the dishwasher in the future?"

- "You" statements can stifle communication. Sentences that begin with "you" can sound like accusations.
- Give feedback or check your interpretation of what is said. Ask questions such as "Do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?" I understood you to say \_\_\_\_\_."

## Tips for Helping Children Cope

Even though you feel overwhelmed with your own problems, as a parent you can help your children cope with the stress. Here is a list of tips for helping children cope.

- You can help your children best by first helping yourself. Try to gain control of your own stress, and you will be more able to help your children cope.
- Provide your children with information about your family's situation in a way that is within the child's understanding. Don't keep the job loss or financial situation a secret from children and other family members, despite the urge to "spare" them or "save face." They need to know how it is.
- Recognize symptoms of stress that may affect your children. Symptoms may include sleeplessness, diarrhea, withdrawal, headaches, and/or angry outbursts. Encourage the child to share feelings and fears. If you feel ineffective in helping your children manage stress -- talk

to the child's teacher, a school psychologist, clergy member or contact a mental health professional.

- See that children eat balanced diets, get adequate rest and plenty of exercise to avoid health problems.
- Try to keep other major changes to a minimum. Too many changes at once can be overwhelming. However, some changes are unavoidable, such as a move, so try to help keep the changes in perspective.
- Help your children focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Look at family and personal strengths and draw on talents and contributions of all family members. Recognize these contributions, especially the small ones.
- Hold a family discussion on how the income loss affects money available for extra activities and allowances. Talk about family spending priorities. Use a worksheet to begin a discussion on how each person will help control family spending.
- Spend family time together doing low-cost or no-cost activities that family members enjoy. Visit nearby museums, hike, bike, camp or play board games. Your county Extension Office has ideas about low- and no-cost family activities.

If older children can find jobs to supplement family income, decide together how their money will be used. Decide whether it will cover their clothing and recreation expenses or whether they will contribute to food, shelter and other expenses. Help them to help the family by contributing to a portion of the family's income.

## Conclusion

Attitudes and family communication have a great impact on how your family deals with unemployment. The members' thoughts and feelings influence their behaviors.

No matter what your children's ages, there are things they can do to help at home when a parent is unemployed.

Here are some suggestions you can give to children to help relieve stress and tension at home.

- Think about the things you do that make other people in your family angry. Find ways to avoid doing those things.
- Do extra chores; help out without being asked.
- Clean up after yourself.
- Avoid picking fights.

Here are some ideas of things children can do when money is short.

- Think about things you've been spending money on that you can do without: movies, magazines, records, gas.
- Think about ways you can earn some money: babysitting, mowing lawns, shoveling snow, delivering papers.
- Think about ways to stretch the money your family does have: sew or mend clothing, garden, babysit for younger brothers and sisters, prepare meals.

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Recommended by

**Michael J. Sporakowski**

Virginia Cooperative Extension Specialist, Family and Child Development, Virginia Tech.

*Adapted from: Krueger, C. M. "Managing Between Jobs: Helping Children Cope." University of Wisconsin-Extension. B3459-15.*  
*Krueger, C. M. "Managing Between Jobs: How You Can Help When Mom or Dad is Unemployed." University of Wisconsin-Extension. B3459-13.*

*Families Taking Charge is a multi-part series for individuals and families experiencing financial stress as a result of difficult economic times.*

*Publication Number 354-097, June 1996*