

TAKING CHARGE in Challenging Times

TEACHING CHILDREN COPING SKILLS

Children are capable of learning and utilizing coping skills that will help them through difficult situations. Adults frequently become so preoccupied they forget that tough times have an emotional as well as a financial impact on their children. Children depend on their parents for emotional security. When parents are tense, upset, and inattentive, it disrupts the flow of normal activities.

Losing a job or income affects all members of the family. It can mean sudden lifestyle changes for the entire family. There is less money to spend, so decisions must be made on how to spend what is there. It may mean other family members must find jobs. It may also reduce the time available for family members to spend together.

Unemployment can mean a parent is home more, which might call for adjusting schedules and space. It may involve a move for the family.

Whatever changes tough times bring, all family members feel the impact. Communicating these feelings and concerns, as a family, is important.

Family Communication

Communication has two parts - talking and listening. Each must occur for communication to be successful. Active listening is essential to understanding the speaker's experience, feelings, and point of view.

As families undergo changes in their lives, they need to talk about them. This includes adults and children. People who are not ashamed to express fears, anxieties, and sorrows, and seek help from others, deal with crises the most successfully. Children who learn this at a young age will be more likely 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 difficulties, 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 through 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 that is needed.

Open communication within the family is vital to good relationships. During stressful times we frequently need people outside the family willing to listen when we need to vent our feelings. In some families, listening without judging is difficult because we want to help, but have strong feelings and opinions. Taking the extra effort to actively listen is important.

Communication Tips

- Be sensitive to nonverbal communication. Clenched fists, fidgeting, eye movements, and other body language can suggest totally different meanings for what is said.
- Avoid "you" statements. They can stifle communication. Sentences that begin with "you" can sound like accusations.
- Share your feelings with "I" statements. "I" statements build trust in the relationship. They give you ownership for what is said. The model for this type of communication is:
 1. Begin: "I feel"
 2. Name situation: "when you"
 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. In the future, would you please put the dishes in the dishwasher?”

Give feedback or clarify what is said. Ask questions such as “Do you mean...?” “I understood you to say...”

Tips for Parents

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; then you are ready 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. Do not keep the income loss a secret from children and other family members, despite the urge to spare them or “save face.”
- Recognize symptoms of stress that may affect your children: 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 children’s teacher, a school psychologist, clergy member, or contact a mental health professional.
- Promote balanced diets, get adequate rest, and plenty of exercise to guard against 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 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, no matter how small.

- Hold a family discussion on how the income loss affects money available for extra activities and allowances. Talk about family spending priorities. Discuss 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. Let the children suggest activities.

Children may ask how they can help their family during times of financial crisis. You can share the "Things You Can Do When Money Is Short" guide.

Helping Children Cope with Stress

Parents should encourage verbal expressions of anger and talk with children. After all, helping them cope with stress is important in helping them become capable and caring adults in spite of adversity. Here are some tips to remember.

- Talk with children about their feelings and concerns.
- Allow children to have their feelings and listen to them.
- Let children know that you are afraid or nervous sometimes too.
- Be honest with children about what is going on.
- Teach children relaxation exercises to use when they feel tense.
- Love, hug, and be direct with children.
- Help children use their imagination to think positively.
- Praise children for accomplishments and efforts.