



Children Feel Family Stress, Too

The news every day is filled with stories about the stresses today's families are experiencing: a parent's loss of a job; struggling to put food on the table; dealing with the military deployment of a family member; suffering eviction or foreclosure; becoming homeless or having to move in with relatives; and parental divorce, among other things. Some families are dealing not with just one of these difficult situations, but with several at once. The effect of any one of these situations on children can't be overemphasized. We know, both from research as well as our own observations, that children suffer from stress, and that stress can have an adverse effect on their development, performance in school, ability to learn, socialization, quality of life, and happiness. And while we can do little to change the big causes of stress quickly, we can all find ways to help children cope more effectively with these challenges to their well-being, regardless of whether we are parents, relatives, child care providers, preschool teachers, school teachers, friends, or caring community members.

Many guides, pamphlets, books, websites, and various media for both children and parents address these issues in depth; these remarks are intended, not as a substitute for deeper exploration, but rather as a brief summary of considerations.

There are two steps to take first, both of equal importance. Regardless of the situation, be sure to let important people in your child's life know what's going on – relatives, child care providers, teachers, coaches, youth ministers – they can provide much needed support to your children. They will undoubtedly notice changes in your child's behavior and attitude, and knowing the situation will help them understand these changes as well as to know how to support your child. The second important first step is to take care of yourself – your children will need to know you are essentially okay, and you will need all your strength to get your family through the difficulties. Find someone safe to talk things over with; get professional help if you need it; use whatever community supports are available to you; stay well.

Next, talk with your kids in a way that is appropriate for their age, and preserves their feelings of security, and their trust in you. Don't ignore the situation – they will sense that something is wrong and, in the absence of good information, will experience anxiety about what it might be. Consult books and on-line resources for things to say in more complicated situations such as military deployment or divorce. In general, use simple language, be factual, acknowledge your feelings, be accepting of their feelings – even anger and sadness, encourage them to ask questions, and reassure them that they did not cause the situation and are not to blame in any way. We know that many children blame themselves when their parents divorce; research shows that children also blame themselves for other situations such as parental job loss/unemployment, family conflict, etc.

It's important to realize that children process and re-process difficult information in "chunks." We know this from observing grieving children: one minute they are grief-stricken and the next minute they are happily playing. Expect your children to have questions, and to want you to explain

the situation to them more than once. During these conversations, reassure them that you are coping and doing the best you can, that you are working to resolve the situation, and that the situation is temporary. Be prepared that they may direct anger and frustration toward you; take it in stride. Let them know that it's okay for them to tell their friends at school – children need to confide in others, too. Tell them that you will be letting their teachers know about what's going on.

Continue the fun family activities that you enjoy sharing: camping and other outdoor activities, family movie night at home, sports and other outdoor play, etc. Physical activity is a great way to relieve stress and discharge anger. Spend plenty of time playing make-believe (let your child choose the themes), and reading stories – these are wonderful ways for children to deal with their anxieties, and provide opportunities for them to share warm cuddles with you.

Maintain as many household routines as you can, and avoid making any big changes, because whatever the situation, it already requires making changes. When change is unavoidable, find ways to normalize it – if you have to move in w/relatives because you lost your home, make sure your child has a favorite book, toy, blankie, or pillow. If you get laid off, perform typical morning routines as if you were still working while you search for a job. In cases of divorce, be sure that children's routines are maintained at each parental household.

Continue to observe the rules of your household and enforce limits; be consistent in discipline. If your child has never slept in your bed before, refrain from starting that habit now, for example. Take every opportunity to promote your child's positive feelings about him or herself, to build self-confidence, to encourage independence. When your child's strong feelings get the best of him and he acts out, show understanding about the origin of the behavior, help your child recover, and tell him you're there to help him through this.

It's important to keep in mind that young children often have regressions during times of significant stress. They may lose skills they previously mastered, such as independence in toileting; they may revert to older comfort behaviors like thumb sucking. All children will show their stress about the situation in some way – withdrawal from fun activities, loss of appetite, difficulties with sleep, physical ailments such as stomach aches, problems in school, etc. By alerting the important adults in their lives, and communicating frequently, everyone can keep track of what's going on, and become aware quickly if these symptoms go beyond what one might expect. Some children may need more help than others dealing with and recovering from these challenging family situations.

Finally, although the greatest burden may fall on parents to support their children through difficult family times, it does take a village to raise a child. We all, even those of us only indirectly involved, can help by developing awareness of these issues, by being understanding when we see children having difficulty managing their behavior, and by showing compassion and kindness for families in whatever ways we are able.

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