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# Protecting The Emotional Health of Our Children in The Face of Tough Economic Times

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Tom Watson is a 41 year old business executive in Los Angeles. He is married with two children, Sam (8) and Sarah (4). Over the past year, Tom's life has taken on a few turns. In September of 2007, he received a promotion to head up his company's marketing department. This meant a company car, an increase in salary and the potential for higher commission rates. Things were definitely *looking up* for the Watson's.

Given this new fortune, Tom moved his family to a more affluent part of town in order to take advantage of the better public school system and raise his family in a "nicer neighborhood." Because his promotion afforded him a company car, Tom and his wife Katie felt confident in purchasing a new car for her as well. Keeping up with the standards of their new neighborhood, they chose a midsize luxury car with a monthly payment hundreds more than they had paid in the past.

In April of this year, Tom's company informed him that they would be taking steps to reduce his travel time due to "recent economic trends." Tom believed that his company valued his role but he couldn't help but worry that less travel time would result in lower sales which would ultimately lead to a decrease in the family's income. It was at that point that Tom began to become concerned about the economy and the effect it would have on he and his family.

He couldn't remember a time in the past where he had to worry about the security of his job and whether or not he and his wife had overextended themselves. Tom and Katie were nervous. Good communicators, Tom and his wife talked about this concern often --Many times in front of their two children. Among the worries: Would Tom's company be forced to let him go? Would Katie have to find a job after being out of the workforce for 8 years? And, in the worst-case-scenario, would they be forced to move? And, if so, could they sell their new home for the same price they purchased it? *Scary times indeed.*

Things for the Watson's had not actually turned bad yet, but news reports continued to focus on the slumping economy. Much of what they read and saw in the media pushed the same message: "The economy is slipping and the country may be heading for an economic depression similar to that of the 1930's."

Although the Watson's children, Sam and Sarah, could not comprehend the financial worries of their parents, they were well aware that something had changed at home. Like most children, they were very sensitive and attuned to their parents. Sam and Sarah noticed *not-so-subtle* changes in their parents demeanor that began to take a toll on their mood and behavior. These changes included the following:

(1) *Katie had become more intense as a result of her worries for her family's security. She was quicker to get upset when the children had accidents (e.g., spilling milk) or misbehaved.*

(2) *Katie began blurting out statements of frustration such as, “I can’t take this anymore. I need to get away from you guys for a while.”*

(3) *Tom spent more time at the office in order to find new creative ways to generate sales. More time in the office resulted in less time for Sam and Sarah to see him. It also left Katie feeling more stress and pressure to take care of the responsibilities at home on her own.*

(4) *When Tom was home, he was often emotionally distant. He began to seek out less time with his children and preferred to watch more television. When he did spend time with his children, he became anxious and had a tough time focusing on them. This would lead him to get up and walk away.*

(5) *Tom and Katie began to fight more. Katie would often blurt out statements like, “Why don’t you try being here all day with these kids. We’ll see how fun you think it is.” And Tom would respond back with statements like, “I’m working my tail off for you and the kids. You think it’s easy to make money with all the crap I’ve had to deal with?”*

Given these recent changes, it is quite obvious why the children began to become anxious and act out. As a result of the changes in their parents’ behavior, Sam and Sarah displayed the following symptoms:

(1) *Sarah began wetting the bed. She also started sucking on her index finger. Psychologists refer to these reactions to stress as regression.*

(2) *Sarah had become “scared” to sleep in her room alone at night. She became much more difficult to put to sleep at night and often awoke to sleep on the floor next to her parents’ bed.*

(3) *Sarah displayed separation anxiety when dropped off at preschool.*

(4) *Sam’s grades dropped and he reported that his teacher had begun yelling at him in class.*

(5) *Sam began getting in trouble at school. Parents had received reports in the past that Sam liked to socialize in class. But more recently, Sam had begun to become much more disruptive (e.g., getting out of his seat frequently and blurting out statements in order to get other kids in his class to laugh).*

Is it possible that the stress stemming from a sluggish economy could have such a profound impact on our family? The answer is, “Yes.”

On an airplane, we look to the flight attendant when we hit turbulence. We assume that she is the one who knows whether or not we’re in trouble. If she appears frightened, we become scared. A good flight attendant knows how to put on a poised face, even in the face of dire circumstances. As a parent, the same principles apply. Despite all of the stress and turbulence in our lives, our children’s emotional health depends on our ability to bring poise and stability to the home. Similar to a hypervigilant flight attendant, a parent who cannot adequately cope with their own anxiety will create a great degree of chaos and anxiety in their children.

For this reason, I am providing the following nine tips which will help you to protect and preserve the emotional health of your children during these tough economic times:

(1) **Do not fight in front of your children.** Studies have shown that children who witness parental conflict and fighting experience intense levels of stress. Be cognizant of your children's whereabouts and avoid dealing with the tough subjects until you and your spouse are alone. In some cases, you may find that it is incredibly difficult to tame your anxiety and/or upset. However, your children will be grateful if you spare them the blowup. If you are unable to prevent yourself from fighting in front of your children, be sure to heed the advice of suggestion number (10) below.

(2) **Keep your poise when dealing with adversity in the home.** Things will never go according to plan. Upset, disappointment and frustration are a part of every parent's daily expectation. But your ability to remain poised in the face of adversity will have a major impact on your child's level of relaxation. Simply put, your upset leads to upset in your child. If the remote control is broken, keep your poise. If your children continue to irritate you with their loud play, keep your poise. And, if you get my point and another example will send you over the edge, keep your poise.

(3) **“Don't tell, unless you need to prepare.”** Some parents feel that it's tough to sit with stressful information. Maxed out credit cards, worrisome changes at work and fears about the economy are difficult with which to cope. When it comes to discussing these “adult” issues, we should only discuss them with other adults. Telling your children may create anxiety for them. For this reason, we should only discuss these issues when there is a need to prepare them for an imminent change. If tough economic times are forcing you to make drastic changes (e.g., switching your child's school, moving into another home or mom needing to return to work), you need to tell your child in advance so that they can prepare for the change.

Even in this case, we want to package the message in such a way that it minimizes any worry on the part of your child. Therefore, educate your child on the change, but do not tell them about the horrible money problems that are making this change necessary. If asked, simply state, “We think this idea will benefit the family because....”

(4) **Balance play time to equal the same time spent disciplining.** It is no secret that when we are stressed, we focus more on the problems in our life than we do the “positives.” Be aware of this. Maintain a mental scale that balances our discipline with playtime, hugs and positive verbal interactions. One way that our children pick up on our anxiety is by noticing our intensity when disciplining.

(5) **Notice when your child walks into the room. Smile and greet them as if you are excited to see them.** Simply put, this will bolster your child's self-esteem. But more importantly, it will display to them that you are happy and relaxed. This will, in turn, allow them to feel relaxed when they are around you.

(6) **Commit to a nighttime routine.** The end of the day is typically the toughest time for the anxious child. Unlike the hustle and bustle of the busy day, falling asleep, alone, in the dark provides little to no distraction. For this reason, children tend to think about many things,

including their worries. Dim the lights, read a book, lay next to your child and *listen* with empathy (avoid talking too much) and you will provide your child with a sense of comfort and a safe place to discuss anything that is on their mind. Children under stress need this time with you. Just like you, they need a place to vent their worries and gain a sense of comfort.

(7) **Clear your head before being around your children.** The greatest luxury you provide your children is not having to worry about the real life circumstances that you, as a parent, have to deal with. Think and worry about the problems as much as you wish. But before you enter your home and sit with your children, make the conscience choice to leave those problems on your front step. Your children can tell when you pull away in the slightest way during a hug. They can certainly pick up on the tension of an anxious parent.

(8) **Keep the focus on your children.** Stressed out parents tend to find an escape (e.g., television, cleaning) or go straight to their spouse to debrief about their problems and worries. Your children will perceive this as tension. Instead of falling into these traps, make a conscious effort to go straight to your children and check in with them. “How was your day?” “What did you do at school today?” “Who did you play with?” and “What did you play?” are all good topics for discussion. By keeping the focus on them, we prevent the focus from being on stressful real-life adult problems.

(9) **Don’t run from your problems.** Many adults try to cope with stress by forgetting about the issue. Deal with it. The anticipation of terrible consequences results in far greater intensity levels of stress than actually knowing what the outcome will be... Even in the worst-case-scenario. Knowing and understanding the problem will allow you to move on and deal with it rather than continuing to run from the fear of not knowing. In addition, forgetting our problems is never an effective strategy. These problems only build on other problems. And as you may know, this will eventually lead us to blowup. If you find that things are just too overwhelming for you, seek out the professional help of a clinical psychologist. Your physician or a close friend is typically a good place to get a referral.

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