



Recession Parenting

Jennifer Friedman, May 2009

No one is safe from the quick changes and uncertain future during this global recession. Whether or not you are directly affected, your children are sure to hear or feel some of the effects even if you try your hardest to protect them from it. All parents, from those who have been laid off or furloughed, to those who know someone who is now unemployed, to those not receiving their anticipated bonuses, to those who are for now “safe”, should listen carefully to what their children are saying and be sure to address their fears and misconceptions. When we talk casually about our worries in front of our children they may not fully understand and may draw conclusions that we as adults would never make. I am not saying that I think parents should try to hide their true situation from their children, as I believe secrecy can lead to more unaddressed fears. What’s more, with the constant media bombardment and endless chatter on the streets and buses and subways, our children are bound to hear enough bits and pieces to begin to worry. Of course, between protectionism and overexposure there is a wide continuum and all parents must find what they feel most comfortable with and what works for their child.

“Recession parenting” requires a little bit extra effort to ensure that our children feel secure. Specialists in child development talk endlessly about routines and weave a message of consistency throughout their advice to parents. But during a difficult economic times keeping the usual routines is not always possible. I encourage parents to take any opportunity that arises to allow children to ask questions and to reassure them of the situation, even if it is a scary or uncertain one. For example, we recently went through some questioning about our housing and what makes financial sense for us. Doing this involved scoping out the rental market. Cecilia bounded into the apartments and pointed out who would sleep where and what she liked and didn’t like about the potential home. The problem was, we weren’t sure what we were going to do and explaining the rental versus buyers markets to little kids is near impossible because WE do not fully understand it! We did take the opportunity to explain our approach. We explained that we wanted to make sure we were making the best decisions for our family. We told them that renting for a little while might make sense, but if it didn’t make sense we wouldn’t do it. We reassured them that the only thing that would change was where we lived; that they would go to the same schools and have the same friends and eat at the same restaurants and do the same fun activities they always get to do. We told them that we are not sure what is best but when we make a decision we will let them know. Of course we always stressed that are lucky to have options. I encourage parents, whether moving to another apartment, another state, or another country, to always point out to their children the things that they have in their lives to be grateful for (a loving parent, relatives, food, hugs, health, etc.) not just because a positive outlook and appreciation of the little things are psychologically beneficial for all of us, but because those are the things that will be stable for a child and make the child feel secure.

I also believe that parents should be honest with their children about their own feelings. Some people feel that telling a child that they feel scared or sad or worried will only worry or scare the child. I think that is true if that is all the parent says. But telling a child how you feel and how you plan to handle it both reassures and shows the child how to tackle his or her own feelings and tough times. A parent who has become unemployed can tell the child, “I am very sad to lose my job. I worry about finding a new one and making sure we have enough money to keep doing all the things we like to do. I’m working hard to find a new job. I am calling people I know and thinking about what kind of job I might like. In the meantime, I’ll get to spend more time with you!” Research has pointed to an increase in hostile parenting during times of economic stress. In dealing with the



stress, parents need to find outlets that work for them (conversation with friends/spouse, therapy, exercise, meditation, etc.). Finding your own outlets for your stress can be a great model for your child, teaching him or her strategies for coping with strong emotions.

You can even involve your child in problem solving: “We have to be a little more careful about money while I don’t have a job. What are some things that we like to do or have but don’t really need?” or “I like to go to the gym but it’s expensive. What could I do for exercise instead?” Getting children involved in decision making, where it is appropriate, can help them feel empowered in difficult situations.

During a time when even adults feel out of control and scared, insecurity does not have to translate into fear or anxiety for our children. Be honest with your children and help them work through their feelings and manage the changes that are happening all around them.