

Job Loss and Kids

By Cris Cannon, originally published in The Biblical Recorder, Friday January 11, 2002

How does a parent explain the loss of a job to a young child? How does a parent help his or her older children understand that they will be secure despite the fact that Mom or Dad is not working? How does a parent help his or her teenager deal with the stigma of "what will my friends think because you have lost your job?" Despite the economic and emotional factors of losing a job, parents must also consider the reality of dealing with the concerns of their children during a time in which they are threatened about the meaning of their own lives. What are some steps that parents may take to help their children during uncertain times?

Information - helping children understand

Younger children have no idea what it means to "lose a job" for any reason. Older children may perceive that the parent has no place to go during the day and now stays home. Adolescents may not understand why Mom or Dad just do not take "any" job to make some money. The key issue in all three of these scenarios is information.

When a job is lost within the family, it is not enough to explain that "I have lost my job." The parent must "tailor" the explanation to the developmental level of the child. For instance, a young child might be told that the company Mommy works for has too many people working there and that Mommy cannot work there right now.

An older child may be threatened that the normal routine of life is different with a parent home all day, so this would be a good opportunity to explain what it means to "search" for a job. The teen, who is embarrassed that a parent is not working, needs reassurance as well as information about the realities of the work world. This is a helpful "teaching moment" for a teen to learn about the meaning of "layoffs" and "economic downturns."

The common denominator for dealing with all children during unemployment is the power of information. If you do not aid your children in understanding the dynamics of job loss in an age appropriate manner, the perceptions they create may be more troubling for the family than the fact that a parent is unemployed. Give thought and care to the manner in which you talk to your children. Ask if they have any questions. Respond with careful answers. At least once a week, "check in" with your children to see what they are thinking or feeling about the situation. Update them on your efforts to find a job. Keep everyone in the informational "loop" and in so doing, keep anxiety from overtaking your children and your family.

Take care of yourself

You no longer have a workplace to go to every morning. You no longer have a reason to get up, get going, and have something to do with your time. Your self-esteem is threatened. Your worries have more than doubled. The "what if" factor of your life has increased a hundredfold. You may find yourself with little energy and feeling out of sorts in your relation with other persons, even avoiding friends or family members.

You need to know:

1. These are all normal feelings that you might be experiencing. The grief involved in the loss of your job will affect you in ways that you have never experienced before.
2. By taking care of yourself, you are in turn taking care of your children and family. What should you do to take care of yourself during this moment in your life?
 - Do not neglect your prayer and devotional life. Spend time with God daily.
 - Exercise. It will give you an emotional and physical boost.
 - Plan your day - and work your plan.
 - Create time to work on your job search, revise your resume and make contacts.

- Help out around the house - allow your home to become your "interim" job.
- Maintain your appearance - how you look will affect how you feel. It will help your children to be secure as they see you "look" the same each day.
- Deal creatively with your guilt - you may not be able to buy the special pair of basketball shoes for your son or send your daughter to dance class simply because you do not have the money. You do not need to feel guilty about your inability to provide "special things" for your children. Explain the situation and they will understand more than you might give them credit.
- Consider whether you need to seek temporary employment and act upon your decision. Go to the local Employment Security Commission and community colleges to seek out whatever help they may offer the unemployed.

The key to taking care of you is to empower yourself. The insecurity of job loss is the lack of control that one feels from not having a job. Until you secure employment, empower yourself by controlling every aspect of your life that you are able to control. You are able to control yourself, and in so doing, offer a sense of care and security to your family.

The 4 "P's" of coping

The Family Adaptation to Financial Loss Project conducted by the University of Hawaii revealed that the family might be the greatest source of strength during unemployment. Forty percent of the project families said they appreciated each other more now than when the initial layoffs occurred. The 4 "P's" of coping are the things the families did that helped them cope with the crisis of being unemployed.

1. **Problem solving** - Families that worked together to find solutions to problems reduced family tensions and conflicts. Showing real interest in working as a team to deal with issues, setting up meeting times to deal with family problems, listening to each other without criticism, and deciding as a group how to solve problems helped families become closer and better cope with the job loss.
2. **Positive Vibes** - Families where members expressed emotional support, showed warmth and communicated positive messages fostered a sense of security that allowed them to deal with the hardships of unemployment.
3. **Parenting** - Children react mainly to the parents' reactions during such a crisis. Parents who controlled their temper, showed affection, stayed involved in their children's daily lives, and maintained household rules and rituals did a lot to keep their children healthy during this difficult period.
4. **Planning** - Families that worked together on a financial plan or household budget reduced the stress that can lead to other family conflicts. Families where the displaced worker developed a plan of action for new employment helped reduce family anxiety.

Although you or a family member may be unemployed, you still have a job. Your new position is to utilize skills such as the 4 "P's" of coping to help your family feel a sense of security during a most insecure time. Children will benefit from parents who are able to openly discuss issues relative to job loss in a non-anxious, non-threatening manner. Including children in age appropriate ways helps them to feel valued and important, and removes the anxiety of wondering what will happen to them. Secure, honest parents who are able to confront concerns with their children offer positive models for children in learning how to deal with uncertain moments in their own lives.

Finally . . .

Although you may be unemployed, do not allow concern about your job loss to keep you from seeing one unintended benefit from this present moment - time. Right now, you may have more time than ever to offer a special sense of care and involvement in your child's life: more time to play, to walk together, to talk, to do homework, to go to those sports games you could not get off from work to attend. You may never have more time in your life than in this unemployed present to give your child a sense of individual care and attention.

In the midst of the fear of not having a job, enjoy the gift of time with your child and make the most of these moments together. Allow the reality of time with your children as an unintended gift of being unemployed. You may never again have such a moment to offer such undivided attention to your family.

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