

Helping children and teens deal with stress in an uncertain time

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As families across the country face losses of nest eggs, homes or jobs, their young children and teens need emotional support.

Child psychologist Michele C. Thorne, Ph.D., assistant professor of clinical psychology at the Indiana University School of Medicine and clinical director of the Consult Liaison Service at Riley Hospital for Children, says that parents should recognize that even newborn babies pick up on the emotional tones of adult stress. She says children of any age, including teens, need to be reassured that they are safe and will be cared for no matter how the family is faring.

Children, especially those prone to anxiety, will jump to conclusions and worry. Dr. Thorne says that if upheaval is occurring or is feared, it is better for children and teens to be prepared.

"Parents need to talk with their children and teens because they need time to adjust to changes. But parents also should censor what they say and shouldn't burden their children with adult worries and concerns," she said

That's because children aren't ready to be saddled with adult burdens. The frontal lobe, the part of the brain that handles planning, attention, concentration, and reasoning isn't fully developed until late adolescence or early adulthood. Or as Dr. Thorne puts it, the main onboard computer which directs how an individual makes decisions isn't fully programmed in children and teens.

She recommends weekly family meetings, especially when a family is going through a difficult time. For example, parents might say that Dad will be home more often because he isn't working and that he will need to use the computer because it helps him locate job leads or keep up with financial markets.

"It's best to talk with your children about what is going on and to explain the family's strategies for dealing with it," she said.

While parents want their children to know that they can ask questions or offer suggestions she counsels against involving children in decisions such as whether to move or how to handle situations outside their spheres of influence.

"You don't want to make your child or teen think you don't appreciate their advice so it's best not to solicit their opinions on things which they are unqualified to make a decision," she said.

As media headlines carry daily updates on the global economic crisis and broadcast news of possible recession, children and teens may be facing an information overload even if not directly affected. Dr. Thorne suggests that parents investigate what is being presented in their children's classrooms for guidance on discussions at home.

If a child appears to be having trouble coping with stress or appears anxious, parents should consult with the child's pediatrician or community mental health services or school counselor. Parents should also make sure they have their own emotional supports in place, which will provide them with the ability to best help their children.

Dr. Thorne's research focuses on the relationship between psychological thriving and coping processes during major life transitions.

Source: Indiana University

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