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## Kids and Recession: Sometimes, You Just Have to Laugh

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As dispiriting, prolonged and unprecedented as this recession has been, adults at least have the gift of perspective -- a "this too shall pass" belief that things will get better. They always have.

For children, there is no perspective. This is all new. And a recent major survey says they're scared.

For the first time, the American Psychological Association (APA) included young people ages eight to 17 in its recently-released annual Stress in America survey. The survey, conducted by Harris Interactive, found that worries about family finances ranked second to doing well in school on the stress meter, well ahead of over-scheduling and relationships with parents.

For parents who want to ease the strain, one of the most effective ways to deal with recession-induced anxiety in children is also, unfortunately, one of the qualities most vulnerable to downturns in the economy.

Fear and disappointment can suffocate the silly playfulness that defines some of the strongest and most resilient families. The inside jokes, movie lines and other reference points that can run through the narrative of family life can be pushed aside. Burping the alphabet loses its glorious silliness when the credit card company is on the phone.

The current American humorlessness is understandable. Recessions aren't funny. This one is taking a particular toll on adults. A recent Gallup-Heathways poll has taken the most comprehensive look ever at the tie between the economy and emotion.

The continuing daily study now grown to 355,300 people found that our moods are ultra-attuned to market dives and bad-news jobless reports. It surely follows that when bad national economic news becomes devastating personal economic news, moods can turn from dark to black.

Interestingly, the APA study found almost 65 percent of parents -- believe that their own stress reactions are somehow invisible to their children, whom they assume were much more consumed by worried relating to school and friends.

That assumption underweights the fact that kids navigate life with their emotional receptors running hot. They hear the conversations -- and the fights -- about money. They feel the fear. They absorb the worry.

In most things, they are resilient; yesterday's drama is easily swept away by today's. A recent Finnish study, however, finds that economic fears may leave scars. Declining family economics can impact children's mental health because it impacts the parents' mental health. Other studies indicate the effects can carry over into adulthood.

There are some common sense guidelines to help parents help children get through this without emotional damage.

Don't calmly say everything is fine, when mood and next-room conversations shout that that it's not. Simple honesty works. So does allowing children to be part of the conversation; never taking frustrations out on the family; keeping as close as possible to a normal schedule and sticking with established rules.

Most important of all: don't let the times kill the laughter.

It helps all of us; not just kids -- especially in periods when the laughs are harder to come by.

Laughing pumps out mood altering endorphins, and dilutes stress hormones -- adding a third choice to fight or flee. There is evidence it can raise the disease-fighting T- and B-cells and lower blood pressure.

Freud, for all his round-spectacled solemnity, wrote a book about the power of humor: *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, where he observed that jokes help people fend off anxiety, fear and anger. Former *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins touted the health benefits in the best-selling *Anatomy of an Illness*, where he wrote that Vitamin-C and the Marx Brothers helped him beat a crippling degenerative illness the medical science failed to cure.

Laughter binds people together; it creates intimacy - among strangers, and within families. In the same way children pick up on parents' darker moods, they will also let themselves be lifted up by the lighter ones. Parents can reset the stress level by remembering a basic rule: when the going gets tough; the tough get silly.

It's time to pull out all the tricks: staring contests, sneak attacks, and silly hats; funny voices, stupid jokes and mattress-forts. Most important are the ones where mom and dad are the butt of the joke; to a child, humor at its finest.

These are wrenching times, angry times and confusing times. But for children, the times are also what their parents say they are. Humor says optimism: "if we're laughing, things aren't really so scary. We're going to be ok."

The best news is: funny is free, and it's easy to use.