



Small Blessings

How Unemployment Can Help Families Grow Closer **By Mary O. Parker**



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While other children talk about where they'll go this summer, Deanna Fisher remains quiet. For her, there'll be no visit to Grandma and Grandpa as usual, nor will there be the customary family trip to Oaks Park for Deanna's upcoming birthday. Since her father lost his job three months ago, the Portland fourth-grader's life has been turned upside-down.

Unfortunately, as Oregon faces its worst economic situation since 1982, Deanna's situation is not unique. Figures released in January by the non-profit Children First for Oregon indicate that over 140,000 children statewide are living at or below the poverty level. When those figures were released in earlier this year, the statewide unemployment rate was 10.7%. Since then, it's risen into the teens and while the Portland area has fared slightly better at 11.6% (as of April 2009), it's still more than 2% above the national average.

Not surprisingly, states Cathy Kaufmann, spokeswoman for Children First for Oregon, "More children are in need of help than ever before in Oregon's history." And she adds, "Thanks to the national economic crisis it's needed at a time when there's even less help available than usual." It's no surprise, then, that Portland's unemployment plight is leaving kids like Deanna struggling, particularly in school. Kaufmann points out that for children who may be facing issues such as homelessness, lack of proper nutrition and healthcare, "It can be pretty hard to concentrate on math class."

Deanna's teacher, Misty Krippen, says, "This was definitely true of Deanna, especially when her father was first laid off. Her grades slipped and she cried at the drop of a hat." Even months later, Krippen says, "She'll sometimes just start crying for no apparent reason. It breaks my heart." But, Krippen has also noticed that the little girl's ability to cope has significantly improved even though her father's employment situation has not. "I credit that with how her family has pulled together through all of this," the teacher states.

"I've actually been pretty surprised at some of the positives that have come out of Deanna's experience," says Krippen. "For starters, everyday now, instead of going to the after-school daycare program like she used to, her dad picks her up and the two of them have gotten into the habit of stopping at the park on their way home. Instead of having money, he's now got time and he's able to spend a whole lot more of it with her."

"The other day they'd made cookies and she brought some to share with the class. Of course, there's not as much food in her house as there used to be so each child only got half a cookie, but as she passed them out it was obvious how proud she was."

Theresa Page, a Portland-based therapist who counsels both children and adults, says that as money gets harder to come by, time becomes an unemployed parent's most abundant currency. "I've seen this with some of my own clients. I have parents I never really got to see before who now bring their children to sessions. It's giving me a chance to have more contact."



projects for school can go from start to completion without them even being aware that the child had the assignment to begin with. And it's not unusual when both parents are working for kids to get their homework done in after-school care without the parents knowing anything about it."

While time is probably the easiest positive to find in the sad situation of unemployment, Page says there are other unexpected gifts. "If parents talk to their children about it, kids can get a sense that just because something ends that doesn't mean there won't be a new beginning. Children can see that there are many lives in a lifetime." For instance, she says, as time goes on, "A parent may even get a new career that they like better than the job they lost."

Another conversation parents can have, suggests Page, is discussion about family finances. She explains that, as the time a parent is unemployed continues and financial pressures mount, old boundaries that existed around the topic of finances tend to shift and parents often begin discussing money more openly. Such discussions can actually be a positive if children are appropriately made privy to issues surrounding finances. "But," Page cautions, "I stress the word appropriate. You'll want to word it right because, if children feel they can't do anything about it their anxiety can become worse."

For example, when money is tight and a child asks for something at the store Page says, "Parents can be overly reactive since they're stressed about money. And children, especially those around the ages of six to eleven, tend to have the sense that things are their fault. It's the type of logic they use at this age."

The solution, Page says, is to have proactive, rather than reactive conversations about the family finances, "that can help teach kids about the world, budgeting and how the family can work together." The result is that children are apt to feel less responsible when Mom or Dad has a strong reaction to financial stress. Additionally, being more aware can compel children to stop asking for treats and such when they recognize that's one way they can help.



A discussion about finances can also extend to the "three Rs." In a state that's already one of the greenest in the nation, reducing, reusing and recycling have become necessary for families facing economic hardship. Kids will feel empowered when they see that actions they've been told will help the planet, will also have a direct and immediate effect on helping the family.

Krippen says that Deanna and her father spend time collecting cans and plastic bottles together almost daily. "Deanna told me they collected enough last month to pay for a big chunk of the electric bill. They'd also had a family conference about how they could use less electricity in the first place. I could tell it made her feel really good to do something to help both by using less and by collecting stuff with her dad."

Certainly no one is pretending that unemployment doesn't present Portland's families with serious problems. And while Kaufmann has a point when she says that, "It's hard to take unemployment and the way it affects children and make it a positive when there are so few options for families facing it," Oregon's unemployment crisis does contain a small blessing: it can create an opening for families to grow closer. By modeling how change can ultimately be a positive, spending more time together and having appropriate conversations, families can come out the other side stronger than ever before.

"I'm not saying it's good that her dad is out of work," Krippen stresses, "but I do think the situation has allowed Deanna's family to get back to basics. I know it's tough for her, but I think the time she's got now with her dad, what she's learning about her own abilities and the memories they're making together will be with her a lot longer than a trip to Oaks Park would be."



The work of freelance writer Mary O. Parker focuses on children and issues that directly affect them in today's ever-changing world.