

## **How parents handle tough times**

**By Ursula Watson**

When Michael Legion Sr. was laid off from a steel production plant in Dearborn last year, he headed home wondering what he was going to tell his family, which includes five young children.

"I just gave it to God," says Legion of Romulus. "When I got home, I sat everybody down and let them know what was going on. I told them we are going to make it though. I didn't want my kids to think that they were going to suffer because of the current economy and the job market being the way it is."

Legion's job was one of 90,000 jobs lost in Michigan last year. The father of five shared his story, as did others around the country, with Robin Walters, the Washington, D.C.-area author of "My Daddy Lost His Job and I Gotta Help Him Find It!" (AuthorHouse, \$11). The book tells the story of a boy who sets out to literally find his dad's missing job, looking for it in the trash and in the family car, finding only a quarter and "an old hard french fry under the seat."

Walters' book helps parents explain to their children what it means to lose a job and gives tips on how parents can include the child in the job-hunting process. She says in the face of uncertainty, parents must provide daily structure in the lives of their children.

Legion, who is enrolled in the Machinist Training Institute at Focus: HOPE in Detroit, says he makes sure his kids go to Cub Scouts and make their Little League games. For him, the answer to resilient children is to provide them with a positive example of someone moving forward in tough times.

"I can't give up on my babies," Legion says. "My dad didn't give up on me. We have good men in my family and we stand tall. I do this not only for my kids, but for the kids in my community because you never know who is watching you and using you as a role model."

Sue Wilk, a social worker in the Wayne-Westland Community School District, says she hasn't seen an increase in behavioral problems at schools because of the economy. "There is always a need. Kids always have a time in their life when things get more difficult," Wilk says. "But the economy does reduce a family's ability assist their child."

As in "My Daddy Lost His Job," Walters' husband, an award-winning TV anchor in the Washington, D.C.-area, found himself unemployed after 20 years.

"We had to explain to our children what we thought happened," Walters says. "He had 22 Emmys, various awards and accolades and was at the top of his game. "We had to explain that it wasn't about their father doing a bad job. This had to be a personal decision that the studio owner had made to go in a different direction. And we told the children, we will move forward."

With her children, Walters made sure they knew she and her husband would handle the hard stuff in life. "We told them their job was to get up, go to school and be happy," she says.

### **Behavioral changes**

Vicky Davis, psychologist and owner of Summit Psychological in Rochester Hills, says crises such as death, divorce and financial hardship, if not addressed, can dramatically change a child's behavior. They can become irritable, moody, aggressive or antisocial.

Davis says some children experience bad dreams, changes in sleep patterns, or have difficulty in school. They also might develop physical problems, such as headaches, stomachaches or loss of appetite.

"Children want to trust in adults and want adults to tell them the truth," Davis says. "You have to explain that these are realities in life. Don't pretend that things don't happen." Charlene Green and her husband decided last year to divorce; but instead of being at war with one another, they decided to rally together to comfort and reassure their children.

"We sat them down and told them we were going to be getting a divorce and this is what mom and dad need to do to be happy," Green of Howell says. "We told them that divorce had nothing to do with them and that we both love them, and will always be there."

Green also sought counseling for herself in order to get a fresh, unbiased perspective on her decision from motivational speaker and life coach Susan McKenna, who holds low-cost workshops and seminars on behalf of

Psychotherapy & Counseling Services in Northville. McKenna says parents want to “fix” things or “fix” their children because they feel guilty for what they are going through during a divorce. But, she says, “They (kids) just want to be heard and to be listened to without parents saying anything.” McKenna found herself divorced with two young children after six years of marriage. She took the hard knocks in her life and decided to help not only parents but also children dealing with divorce. She authored two children’s books called “Feelings Only I Know: Mom and Dad Are Getting Divorced” (Wayfarer Press, \$14.95) and “More Feelings Only I Know: Divorce and Fighting Are Hurting My Heart” (Wayfarer Books, \$14.95).

She says stronger family bonds can evolve from a divorce. “Some parents that were mediocre during their marriage become better parents after the divorce,” she says.

#### Help through tough times

Amy Esper lost her mother more than a year ago. While dealing with her own pain, she also found herself faced with helping her six children cope with the loss of their grandmother.

“It was a time when I didn’t have a lot of time to devote to them,” she says. “They were curious and had questions about what was going to happen to their grandma.”

Esper and her husband Greg decided to openly discuss dying and death with their children, but she recalls how difficult it was to find books or other assistance on the subject. Eventually, she found “Today Someone I Loved Passed Away,” (Aunt Dee’s Attic, \$19.95) by Dianne M. Ahern. The book tackles mortality and addresses the concerns of children in a language they can understand. “I think it ties up loose ends from what they remember about their grandmother’s death,” says Esper, a Whitmore Lake resident who reads the book to her children.

Ahern, who lives in Ann Arbor, says children need to understand what happens in death and be able to discuss their feelings.

“Parents must explain to children how they are going to feel,” she says, “tell them they will be sad, and it is OK .” Ahern realized how death can affect children when she was a child. “My parents adopted my cousins when their parents died. They were very young, but my brother has been affected his whole life by their death while my sister dealt with it well.”

#### **How to help**

***In divorce, death or financial struggle, parents move into survival mode. They become less emotionally available and parenting skills diminish, says divorce coach and parent educator Christina McGhee.***

***Here are some tips to help parents get their children through a family crisis.***

***Observe your child’s behavior.***

***Have they gone from being a happy-go-lucky kid to being withdrawn? Are their grades slipping or have their eating or sleeping patterns changed? As a parent, be self-aware of how you’re managing the crisis. You may feel a certain way about something, but that doesn’t mean the child feels the same way. Keep the lines of communication open with your child. Do this even if it seems to be the last thing the child wants to do. Let them know you’re there to listen.***

***Accept that as a parent you can’t always do it all.***

***Talk to your child’s teachers and counselor at school and inform them of the circumstances. Have a close friend or a coach talk to your child.***

***Parents struggle and need access to information.***

***The idea of running to a bookstore can be overwhelming. Get with a life coach, who may offer help online or over the phone. Attend workshops or support groups at a church. If it is within your means, seek counseling.***

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