

Economic Troubles: Stress at Home, Bullying at School

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The stock market is plummeting, destroying your investments and retirement. The value of your house is less than you paid for it and now it needs repairs you can't afford. You are worried about job security and the very real possibility of getting laid off. You are stressed and your children can sense your high levels of anxiety.

The way that parents react to economic issues and deal with stress, fear, and anger during nerve-racking times impacts children tremendously. Financial stress can create uncertainty and tension in the home which, in turn, can create stress for children, too. When adults act inappropriately out of anger or fear, quickly losing their patience, speaking sharply, or behaving disrespectfully towards family members, they increase the chance that their children will exhibit these same behaviors. Disrespectful and bullying behavior at school often stems from role models at home.

Children Do What They See

In 1961, Canadian psychologist Dr. Albert Bandura headed "The Bobo Doll Experiment." This research demonstrated the critical role of modeling in human behavior, concluding that much human behavior is learned from observing others.

The experiment studied three groups of children. Each child was placed in a room with appealing toys. The first two groups of children were placed in rooms where an adult was sitting in one corner with their own assortment of toys, including a toy mallet and a "Bobo" doll (a five foot tall inflatable clown designed to spring upright when knocked over). The children were not permitted to play or interact with the adult's toys.

In the first group, the adult would begin to verbally and physically attack the Bobo doll for a period of 10 minutes. In the second group, the adult would play peacefully with the toys, including Bobo. The children in the third group played with toys in a room with no adult present.

Children exposed to the aggressive model were more likely to imitate aggressive behavior while subjects exposed to the non-aggressive adult, or no model at all, showed little aggressive behavior. Continuing research has shown that children observing an adult role model exhibiting violence are more likely to believe that this type of behavior is normal and are more likely to use aggression when faced with similar situations.

Role Modeling Behavior when Stressed

Many people are feeling out of control during the current economic collapse, which is tremendously anxiety-producing. A stressed parent who lashes out and attempts to express power and control in a physically or verbally abusive manner communicates to their child that

such behavior is normal and acceptable. This modeling can create similar behavior in their child at school. At their age, it is called bullying as they abuse others in a desire for control.

During tumultuous times like these, it's especially important for parents and other adults to teach children how to behave when they're feeling stressed and out of control. Consider a variation of Gandhi's advice, "Be the change that you wish to see in your children."

Through action and discussion, share ideas with your child about healthy and respectful outlets for emotions when feeling stressed. Forgive yourself and your child for past indiscretions and vow to work together to express respect, even during times of turmoil.

Discuss physical cues that indicate stress, such as muscle tension in hands, face, neck or back, or a desire to hit or scream. Recognizing these cues should lead to performing self-calming techniques such as slow, deep breathing, taking a bath, or listening to soft music. Or, consider activities that release pent up energy in an appropriate manner, such as running, dancing, or participating in a sport.

Role model these behaviors when *you* experience stress. As Bobo showed, children need to see adults handle stress in a healthy way in order to handle stress well themselves. Of course, changing your behavior can be very challenging, especially when you are stressed. So take the team approach. Talk to family members about what you are feeling, and ask for their help. For instance, ask your family for a stress-free half hour after you get home from work. Or, if you find yourself getting overwhelmed, you might say, "I need to take a few minutes to calm my mind." Then take those few minutes and engage in a stress-reducing activity.

If your child is bullying at school, talk with your child's teacher and, with your child's input, develop a behavior plan and determine appropriate, meaningful reinforcement of desired behavior. This type of teamwork not only promotes cooperative behavior, it creates consistent expectations between home and school.

You may not have control over the economic crisis and what it means for your family, but you can control how you respond to it. Be a good role model and teach your children that, regardless of outside influences, no one has the right to abuse or bully others.