Parenting in a Recession, Today’s Parent, 2009

By Karan Smith

Chad Lucas used to spend his time recording rebounds and assists for The Chronicle Herald and working until midnight as a sports reporter for the Halifax daily. But these days he's in the kitchen creating vinegar-and-baking-soda volcanoes with his two boys and helping out at bedtime, reciting *Green Eggs and Ham* and recounting the hijinks of the Beagle Boys and Scrooge McDuck.

For Lucas and his family, it's an unexpected upside to the recession.

As layoffs loomed, 29-year-old Lucas opted to take a buyout instead of waiting for a pink slip. So now he's using the months, while living on a severance package, to prepare for a growing family, hang out with his kids, Xander, 4, and Oscar, 2, and pursue some goals of his own. Library visits and bike rides with his “two little whirlwinds” are on the agenda now, says Lucas, who credits a frugal lifestyle and the meticulous budget of his wife Shawna, a stay-at-home mom, for helping them weather the job loss.

The cool winds of the global economic meltdown are drifting into households everywhere. In Canada, as the unemployment rate reached an 11-year high in May, almost a quarter of all employees, according to an Ipsos Reid poll, say they fear for their positions. It's too close to home for some: Layoff notices or dwindling income, and with that come sleepless nights and real stress about mortgage payments and monthly bills. And it isn't just paranoia. A report from the Vanier Institute found that many families, with spending and debt on the rise, are financially ill-prepared to cope.

But amidst the worry, some parents are rethinking family values and finding new strengths. “Slow” or “free range” parenting is on the upswing, with families now spending more time together riding bikes and jumping on the trampoline, instead of browsing La Senza Girl, shopping for the latest Wii game or racing to the next music class. Some families are learning to make do with less – sharing bedrooms, passing down clothes and buying fewer toys. And money is now out of the closet, with new, sometimes tough, lessons on want versus need. Many parents now find themselves talking about the bigger economic picture with their kids, including the value of saving, the need to help others, and emphasizing an appreciation for everything the do have.

“I think people really are hurting and there’s no question that the basics of life cost money – health care, housing, education, child care,” says Betsy Taylor, the author of *What Kids Really Want That Money Can’t Buy*. “But I do think in that context people are going back to say, OK how do we regroup here? How do we focus on being OK?’ And that's leading to a lot of conversations with children that I think in the long run will strengthen those children.”

Parents naturally want to protect children from hardship, says Taylor, who founded the New American Dream, a non-profit organization based in Maryland. But in tougher times we can show our children how to get through the ups and downs of life – and focus on what matters to our family, she says.

In this economic climate, Taylor sees a return to the values of the Depression era, when families experienced real fear, hunger and loss of livelihood. That generation grew up to be clear on their values, resilient and focused on community and family, says Taylor, whose two kids are in college and now shop at thrift stores to save money.

**Money talks**

For Victoria dad Robert Gialloreto, the downturn has meant talking more with his 8-year-old daughter Megan about how people around the world are having trouble keeping their jobs, and homes, “and that lots of things we spend money on are nice-tos versus have-tos.” Both Gialloreto, who works in the tourism industry, and his wife Christie, a sports psychologist, have seen friends put off retirement due to the recession, and are preparing for the what ifs.

“It's been a good opportunity, even at the age of eight, to be able to teach, not economics per say, but just the value of money,” says Gialloreto, 45. For his family, that means talking about what they can do together, for free – running, biking, cooking. Gialloreto also sees his daughter learning from decisions he and his wife make – for instance the canceling of an upcoming holiday – and sees her making more frugal spending choices with her own allowance, such as deciding, after 25-minutes of consideration, to not buy a new wallet.

Money wasn't really discussed at home with her two girls, until the recession made it an issue, says Donna Fradley, 44. The single mom, who runs a high-end wholesale jewelery business, has taken on a bigger work load to bring in more income during the downturn. That has meant ramping up business travel, leaving for weeks to attend gem shows and jewelery sales. And home-life cutbacks are on the agenda, says the Calgary mom, who has had to cash in her RRSPs and is now scrutinizing every expense, from dance and choir classes to annual family holidays in Southeast Asia where her jewelery is produced.

It's been especially hard for her eldest, 12-year-old Juliana, who was literally growing out of her wardrobe.  “I really was not in a position that I could take her shopping. ... And as many times as I said it... I don't think she understood it because it had never been like that before.”

The new openness at home has made her think about her priorities, says Fradley. “Going through hardship, which I am right now, really does change your values and the way you look at things. What's important is my kids, my relationship with my kids.” She says her daughters, even if they're having a hard time with the changes, are helping her focus on making the most of each day.  “When you've got two kids, you have to be positive. How can you not?”

Jennifer Kolari, a family therapist in Toronto and a mother of three, says in times of stress kids need to know what's really going on — and learn from your example. “You can also show your child: ‘We're making decisions, we're doing what we can to get ourselves through this. Bad things sometimes happen in life and we're going to be OK as a family. We're going to figure it out.’”

**Time versus money**

Some families are switching to potato-sack-race birthday parties instead of paying for entertainment, heading to the library instead of amusement parks or growing vegetables instead of going out for pizza — whatever they can do to keep the credit card at home.

Kat Eden’s family has initiated monthly “0$ Weekends.” The San Carlos, Calif., mom has seen friends lose jobs and now she and her husband are cutting back to build a rainy day fund and to teach her two boys about the new economy.

“I think it's not too far away before they're going to be in the position to make a difference in the world,” says Eden about JT, 6, and Luc, 4. “So I want those seeds planted very early that if we all work together we can make the world better. And already there are ways they can contribute – by turning off lights, having fewer new things. I like them to start thinking that way. I want them to know that the world is not perfect, without having them get scared.”

On the 0$ Weekends, the family has camped in the backyard, created in-house movie nights and shared picnics on the beach. (And while there are no Home Depot errands or money spent on entertainment, they will open their wallet for the odd necessity, such as bottle of sunscreen.)

“One thing that they did miss was the chance to eat out in a restaurant,” says Eden, 36, a marketing director for an education website. “So one weekend we made our own restaurant and we made little menus and they got to be the waiters. …They really have fun with it. It makes everybody be more creative than we are otherwise.”

**Making Do With Less**

Julie Cole, a mother of six — yes, her blog is called “The Baby Machine” — finds the recession has strengthened her parenting philosophy.

“For me it's not necessary that they have a lot of things, but for me it's necessary that they do a lot of things,” says the Burlington, Ont., entrepreneur of a kids' label business. That means her kids – ranging in age from 9 to a baby born in April – still enjoy ski lessons or hockey games. But they won’t have the latest gear. Cole's large family has already learned how to share a four-bedroom house. One inspiration? Her mother-in-law, who was raised in war-time Holland, and slept in a kitchen drawer as a baby. “She has great childhood memories and turned into a fabulous adult.”

Saying *no* more often — especially if families had been swept up with *yes* — can help our children, says Kolari, the author of *Connected Parenting*.

“They will learn that having possessions, and having material things are not always the answer... I'm sure many parents, me included, have Toys R Us in the basement and our kids are not happier for it.”

Saying no also prepares children for life's bumps, she says. “Kids need to hear no because life is full of no.”

**New strengths**

Karyn Elrafih's two boys are now collecting coins in old baby bottles for a local pregnancy and family crisis centre.

When the Belleville, Ont., couple received news of layoffs at their biotech company, they realized things would have to change. Their jobs were spared, but still it shook them. “It suddenly hit us - what are we doing to prepare our boys for the real life world?” says Elrafih. “We have been very blessed to be in a financially sound position for many years, but these past few weeks have made us realize that things change quickly.” So the family started cutting back on expenses and her husband Mohamed resurrected a pastime from his childhood in Lebanon – making toys. So far, he and the boys have created a slingshot out of sticks and old lab tubing and a cart out of training wheels, an orange crate and a broom handle.

Elrafih has noticed her boys, Aiman, 6, and Keenan, 4, are now more conscience about where their “sharing” money goes.

“One major point we try to drive home to them now also is giving. Even in these difficult times it is so important to remain committed to helping others ... and I encourage them to tithe to our local church as it has many programs that give to community organizations.”

Even teens seem to be getting the message – a US study by World Vision and Harris Interactive, found that nearly seven out of 10 parents say the current economic climate has made their teens “more aware of the needs of others.”

For Lucas, the Halifax sports reporter-turned-nightly-storyteller, he hopes his family's new situation will teach his kids something valuable: to roll with change, to question the status quo, and to live with an adventurous spirit.

“Right now we're looking at it as an opportunity — not sort of panicking or anything yet,” says Lucas, who is hoping to use some of the time to pursue his dream of writing children's fiction. “I don't think the whole economic situation means anything to them because they're too young. It just means Daddy's home at bedtime.”

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