

Psyched Up!

Tip Sheet Presented by your LOCS School Psychologists

Coping in Unsettling Times: Economic Difficulties



Feeling the Effects

Current events in our country and world, including the "economic crisis" can be unsettling for young people. Many families in our area have experienced financial and job turmoil, resulting in children who may be confused or fearful that they or their family and friends may be at financial risk. As we see daily, families are losing incomes, homes and medical coverage. The use of food stamps and food banks has increased; there is more transience and homelessness. Not all students are affected, however, it is our job as caring adults and teachers to help children feel in control, even when vulnerable, sad, or angry.

Research has shown that students' social, emotional, and behavioral health affects their academic achievement. This has enormous implications for teachers, school mental health providers, and the students themselves. A student body that is hungry, disengaged, preoccupied, or behaviorally disruptive simply is not going to respond as well to even the best instruction.

Families and Students

Most children sense that something is going on around them and, depending on family circumstances, will bring their anxiety into school. How children respond is dependent upon how the adults in their lives handle difficult life changes. The perceived loss of dignity and added stress with life changes can cause parents to become angry, frustrated, depressed and occasionally abusive. Some "self-medicate" through increased use of drugs and alcohol. Some students will bring their worries to school; some are as worried about their parents as much as themselves, which is extremely anxiety-producing for children of any age. This stress may manifest as increased absenteeism, a drop in classroom performance, or more frequent physical complaints (e.g., stomachaches, headaches, etc.). Even students whose families are not directly affected by economic problems may be feeling stress because of friends or neighbors who are affected, the general increase in tensions at school, or the ongoing wave of bad news. Children may not be able to articulate what is bothering them and may become disruptive, inattentive, or moody without knowing exactly why. Families and students who were having problems before the economic crisis are especially vulnerable.

SIGNS OF STRESS AND ANXIETY IN CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS

- * Irritability
- * Unusual emotionality/volatility
- * Sleep difficulty/tiredness
- * Inability to concentrate
- * Drug/alcohol experimentation

- * Drop in grades/school functioning
- * Headaches/stomachaches
- * Unexplained fears/increased anxiety
- * Isolation from peers

Factors That Help Prevent Stress and Anxiety

- Positive problem solving and coping skills
- Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults
 - Clear expectations
 - Permission and ability to learn from mistakes
- Developing competencies (e.g., academic, social, cocurricular, and life skills)
 - Consistent, positive discipline

An Action Plan

Be there for your students. It's easy to forget the most obvious: students need you. You cannot do everything, but you can model caring and engagement. Greet students in the morning and ask how things are going. Walk the halls. Attend school events. Hold informal discussion groups. Encourage students to become involved in after-school activities. Always reinforce successes, no matter how small.

Determine basic needs. Work with all staff members to establish supports for students who have increased basic needs. This can include allowing students to shower at school; holding a clothing drive within the community to bring in changes of clothes for students; or establishing partnerships with parent groups or community resources whose members might be able to provide basic items or services, such as additional after-school tutoring. Extended or more flexible before- and after-school care options, or homework clubs, may also be needed. For some students, they may simply need the ear of a caring teacher.

School Atmosphere. Try to build a sense of connectedness among students, faculty members, and families. It is important to maintain the stability of school routines and normalcy; school may well be the most stable part of a student's life right now.



Incorporate social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Elementary school students may need help separating fact from fiction with regard to the financial crisis, and explanations need to be given in age appropriate, nonthreatening terms. The information they get from television or their friends is probably not reliable and may actually increase their anxiety. Being factual and reassuring is critical, particularly for young children who can often imagine things are worse than they are. For older age students, this can include explaining other difficult times the country has overcome and helping them identify times when they and their family have coped with challenges. Young children may need to express their feelings through play or art activities. Teachers are in an ideal position to integrate this information into health education, social studies, and other classes.

Find support. Be aware when a student may need additional support. Schools have access to many resources, including counselors, social workers, psychologists and Family School Coordinators. It may be helpful to provide group counseling sessions for students on coping with stress, or provided workshops for teachers and/or students on stress management.

It is important to recognize the role that all staff members play in promoting healthy student behavior and the direct link that successful teaching and learning has to student behavior.

Resources:

National Association of School Psychologists Handout: Coping in Unsettling Times: Economic Difficulties
National Association of School Psychologists Article: Tough Economic Times: Supporting Student Well-Being and Academic Progress