

Frugal Parenting in Tough Financial Times

With finances looking tight for a long time ahead, families need to stretch every dollar. This is a great opportunity for teaching your children important money values. Even your preschoolers can understand saving and spending if you talk *with* them and not *at* them about the need to spend less.

Explain to your youngest that the country is like a really big family. As she knows, sometimes your family can spend money on fun things and sometimes it can't. Now is a time when the big family—the whole country—has to cut back so all the little families like yours have to pitch in and help out. (I wouldn't suggest running this argument by Henry Paulson!) Teens can certainly understand the facts of our current financial difficulty, how it affects your family, and learn a valuable lesson in restraint as well. No need to sugar coat the problem but do explain that this is temporary.

Discuss all together where your family must cut back so you don't end up screaming at your kids in resentment when they demand what they are used to having. They are perfectly capable of helping and cooperating when you are clear and honest with them and talk to them with logic. When they know that all of you are in this together, that each family member is going to have to sacrifice a bit for the whole family, they will step up to the plate. That said, don't expect them to be considerate when the moment comes and they find out they can't have something they want. Children are highly egocentric. Try empathy, "Of course you're mad that you can't have that game. I would be too if I were you. This is really hard for all of us. We need to stick together and find ways we can have fun without spending extra money."

Here are some ideas on how to cut back creatively:

- Set up a regular, rotating car pool.

The more parents, the more gas savings. Involve at least one other parent for pick-up and drop-off at day-care and school, as well as for extracurricular activities.

- Create a babysitting team.

Join with other parents in your or your child's social circle and agree to watch each others kids. Use family members.

- Make your own baby food.

Get a baby food grinder and mash up just about anything. Most vegetables and fruits can be cooked or strained and put into ice cubes trays to freeze. Then pop the cubes into

storage bags and keep on hand. This is better for your babies and toddlers as the grainier, thicker texture helps in the transition to table food.

- Wear hand-me-downs.

Save money on clothes your kids will out grow in a few months. Invite your friends to have a used clothes swap party. Also check out freecycle.org to give and get clothes and baby furniture for free. Shop at The Salvation Army, Goodwill or a consignment shop.

- Barter

Check out the possibility of paying for lessons and services for your children with your own talents and services instead of money.

- Use the library.

Libraries typically have wonderful children's sections. You can check out books, magazines, and DVDs for free. Libraries also have free children's programs such as story time and puppet shows.

- Give up something.

Each week decide as a family what you will each give up for the week that costs extra money. It's only for a week; then replace it with something else the following week.

- Hold a family garage sale.

Let the kids know that they get to keep the money for whatever they sell of their own. Decide whether each keeps all their money or _ gets pooled and the family does something fun together. Remember never to sell anything that belongs to a child without asking first.

- Make school lunches.

Discuss and estimate how much making lunches will save the family. Use sandwich bags for snacks and veggies rather than buying the more convenient and more expensive prepackaged products. Aside from money, it saves time and morning battles to make lunches the night before.

- Buy in bulk.

Toilet paper, paper towels, non-perishable foods are always cheaper in bulk if you have the storage space.

- Involve your kids.

Make a list of ways you are cutting back. Ask the kids how they can cut back as well. Let them know you understand there will times when everyone feels angry about not getting something they want. Create a family contest to design a fun family outing that costs the least amount of money.

Your kids are capable of stepping up to the plate, contributing, and cooperating. If you worry about disappointing them, fear their anger, don't have time to talk about it, you will set yourself up for even harder times. Disappointment is important for them to deal with. But do expect them to be egocentric kids, see the world from their point of view, and appeal to their sense of logic. When they know you understand, they will understand as well. Don't try to reason in the heat of the moment. Let things calm down, then problem solve how things can work best for all of you.