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## Answering the Trickiest Questions: Job Loss

By Valerie Frankel

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**The scenario: Either you or your spouse has been fired.**

### AGES 8 AND UNDER

"School-age kids need to know what to expect. If they can anticipate change, there'll be less emotional upheaval. Emphasize any potential upside; minimize the downside," says Duffy. "Ease the transition for the child by assuring him he'll be OK and by demonstrating stability. The need-to-know info is that your family will be living differently for a while, but will be OK." Do not freak out or overshare your thoughts and feelings. Your kid should be spared the office-politics horror stories and commentary on a looming mega-depression. Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., a child and adolescent therapist in Los Angeles and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety Into Joy and Success*, warns against ranting about how much you hate your former employer in front of your kid if you were fired. And, she says, "if you show fear or say 'I'm afraid,' a small child might take on some of your anxiety, which can be overwhelming for him."

**What to say:** The experts recommend something like, "I'm home during the day lately because, like a lot of other Americans, I lost my job. I'm already looking for a new one. We'll be OK. We won't buy a lot of new clothes, and our vacation will have to be postponed. It's just a temporary thing we have to get through together." To validate kids' emotions, ask how they feel, and repeat back what they've expressed, e.g., "I understand your disappointment. I'm sad, too, about canceling our trip. But we'll have fun at home."

### AGES 9 TO 14

Kids in this age range are like mirrors. They reflect emotions they perceive. "What you feel, they feel," says Duffy. "If you feel anxious, you can bet they will, too. The way to mitigate anxiety is to stick with the facts." Share that Dad is looking hard for work; the family has some savings; the situation is serious but not grave.

**What to say:** Don't skirt the issue and pretend everything's fine. "The key words are 'realistic' and 'hopeful,'" says Dr. Hallowell. For instance, you could say, "I'd be happier if Dad had a new job, but in the meantime, we'll be realistic about what we can afford. We'll cut back and make do with less. I'm hopeful this period will be over very soon. We'll get through it."

### AGES 15 AND UP

Kids will feel betrayed only if they're lied to. So don't make promises you can't keep or misrepresent what's happening. If you actually can't afford the status quo, don't tell a teen you'll be fine. "Older teens want to feel respected and valued," says Dr. Hallowell. "They'll appreciate frank conversation and should be encouraged to contribute solutions."

"Sixteen-year-olds will want to know if they can help out by getting a part-time job or applying for scholarships when it's time for college," adds Duffy. Hashing over options is more uplifting than crying over the bills (save the tears for your spouse).

**What to say:** "Life isn't always easy, but bad times do make us stronger," you can explain. "As bad as this might seem to you now, it'll be worse if we don't support one another. We will survive. We might wind up better off for having been through this. Let's figure out a few ways to make things better for all of us now."

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## Answering the Trickiest Questions: Illness

By Valerie Frankel

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**The scenario: Your mom has been diagnosed with cancer; she needs surgery and chemo, but the outlook is still dire. You've been on the phone constantly, talking to your parents and the doctors.**

### AGES 8 AND UNDER

Just as the illness will be ongoing, so should the conversation about it. "Don't do a sit-down, put it all out there, and think, *That's done*. Your child will want to be kept in the loop," Duffy continues. "He might listen to the update and go right back to Xbox. But he doesn't want to feel like he's being shut out."

**What to say:** Don't try to hide the truth; do keep the message simple. The experts advise something like, "Grandma is sick with an illness called cancer. She's going to the doctor for treatment. She will have less energy than usual, so we are going to visit her more often. In fact, the next time we see her, instead of Grandma's taking you to the movies, we are going to watch a DVD at her house. But remember, she loves you and wants to talk to you on the phone like always." Also worth noting: Young kids take

things literally. "Be careful of your wording. The classic example of an ambiguous phrase is equating death with 'going to sleep.' A child might become terrified of bedtime due to that expression," says Dr. Koplewicz.

### AGES 9 TO 14

"With terminal cancer, kids this age are better off knowing the truth," says Dr. Hallowell. "You should lay out a plan for how your child can deal with his questions and emotions. The first step is never to worry alone; if the child is anxious, he or she should seek out a parent, teacher, or friend to talk to about it. Second step: Get the facts, even if they're grim. Kids will take comfort in knowing what to expect. Step three is to make a plan, like calling Grandma every evening. This gives the child a focus and distracts him from the (frightening) inevitable."

**What to say:** Stick with the facts, say the experts. You can answer, "Things don't look good for Grandma. But she'll get medicine so she won't feel pain." Empathetic tweens will want to talk about your emotions. Express them like a statement of fact, as in, "I'm upset about Grandma. I'm relieved we have good doctors. I'm happy to be able to help her as much as I can." Encourage your child to express her emotions as well. Open with a simple, direct "What are you feeling?" Repeat often.

### AGES 15 AND UP

Try hard to keep it together, even when talking with older kids. "Make sure you are the parent — the caretaker — and not the other way around," says Reznick. "It's tempting to unload to teens, but no matter how mature they look or act, they are still children and are not there to take care of you emotionally — even if they ask how you feel."

**What to say:** When a teen is facing the loss of a loved one — possibly for the first time in his life — let him talk, validate his feelings, and reassure him that he will be all right. You can say something along the lines of, "I know you're upset. That's normal. I'm here for you whenever you want to talk. And as hard as this is, know that you'll be OK."

Isn't that what anyone of any age really wants to hear? No matter what drama and trauma life throws your way, no matter how many questions your child comes out with, the line of inquiry usually boils down to one big and urgent question: "Are we OK?" Feel free to give the honest, optimistic answer: "We will be."

"All young kids want to know during a divorce is, 'What about me? Will my life change?'"

Kids will feel betrayed if they're lied to, so be honest with them if you lose your job

"With teens, don't unload all your emotions. Make sure you remain their caretaker"

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