



'Well Kids, I Lost My Job'

How Newly Laid-Off Fathers Should Break the News to Their Children

By RUSSELL GOLDMAN

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It didn't take long for Thom Rouse's 8-year-old son to realize something was wrong.

"He caught on pretty quickly that he was seeing a lot of me lately. He wanted to know why he was with me all the time, why I was available to pick him up and drop him off from school," said Rouse, a 39-year-old father of two from New Jersey.

"I knew I could either lie to him or tell him that [I had lost my job](#)," said Rouse. "I decided to tell him the truth."

It's a decision millions of parents have had to make in recent months. How does a parent, especially a father whose sense of self is often tied to being a provider for his children, tell his kids that he has been laid off?

With Father's Day around the corner, the [largest number of men in a generation are struggling](#) with how to break the news that they have lost their jobs to their children.

The U.S. [unemployment rate is the highest it has been in more than 20 years](#). In May, the number of unemployed people increased by 787,000 to 14.5 million, and the unemployment rate rose to a 25-year high of 9.4 percent, and the rate for adult men jumped 9.8 percent last month.

The Labor Department has yet to break down this year's figures for fathers. In a report released last month that looked at the 2008 unemployment data, out of 35 million families, there were some 2.4 million unemployed fathers of children 18 years old or younger.

Advertisers have tapped the growing market of recently laid-off fathers, playing mostly to their fears about being able to put food on the family table.

In a [television commercial for Liberty Mutual](#), a father interrupts his family's chatter over dinner in a stereotypical suburban tableau.

"Can I speak just for a couple of minutes over something that's going on?" the middle-aged dad says nervously to the table at which his children, wife and elderly father-in-law are seated.

"Things at work are changing a little bit right now," he continues. "There's been some layoffs; I don't know how far that's going to go. Which means the amount of money that's coming into this family is going to be affected. Some of the promises that we made -- your mother and I & may have to be put on hold for a while. & As of right now we gotta kinda tighten the belt. So we all gotta work together on this

and keep the bills to where we can actually afford them."

A Direct, Matter-of-Fact Approach Usually Works Best in Telling Children About a Layoff

Rouse, a former Web designer for Merrill Lynch who was furloughed in May soon after the company was acquired by Bank of America, took a similarly direct approach to telling his son he had lost his job.

"We were in the car together, and I was dropping him off. He wanted to know why it seemed like we were together a lot more often. So I pretty much told him that I don't have a job anymore. I didn't sugarcoat it," he said.

"I explained to him that Bank of America bought the company where I worked and that they already employed people who did the same kind of work I do. I explained that I didn't do something wrong, but this is how businesses operate. It was all matter-of-fact," he said.

Rouse said he "stressed the pros" of being laid off and that his son Brennan, 8, "seemed OK with it."

Rouse has, however, decided not to tell his other son, 6-year-old Owen, about the layoff.

Psychologists give Rouse high marks for his straight-forward approach, though they differ on whether he should have been as upfront with his younger son as he was with the older boy.

"Regardless of age, it's important to be honest," said Stephanie S. Smith, a public education coordinator in Colorado for the American Psychological Association.

"It might be tempting to keep this information from kids, but it's best to be honest and let them know what's going on in an age-appropriate way," she said.

Experts said kids can often see through their parents' lies, and it's best to be honest rather than make up a false explanation.

Parents should be reassuring and let their children know that though some changes may be taking place, they remain protected and loved, said [Cara Gardenswartz](#), a psychologist who often counsels parents.

"Let kids know you're taking care of things," she said. "Tell them you're looking for a job. Stress that this is temporary. Let them know you're in charge and let them ask questions. Look for what they are saying and not saying. Don't appear anxious. Look confident. Don't say, 'We're scared.' Make them feel secure."

Children May Act Out When Parents Lose Their Jobs

Gardenswartz advised keeping your children in their normal routines for as long as possible, cutting back on things one at a time rather than all at once.

"Try not to make big changes to their lifestyle all at once. Try not to rip your kids out of all five of their after-school classes or activities all at once," she said.

Parents should also look for signs of anxiety in their children -- acting out, or problems with eating and

sleeping.

Parents, Smith said, should not look to their children to support them.

"You don't want to use your kids as support system. Don't use your kids as a sounding board or as your therapist," she said.

Rouse said Father's Day this year will be a relatively low-key affair. He is beginning to worry that the more time that passes, the more difficult it will be to find a job and his severance will run out.

"I'm already thinking about ways to cut back. We can't go anywhere that costs too much money. Even going to the beach, with lunches and gas, adds up."

On Sunday, he'll join his father and take his sons "out to a big breakfast."

"We don't really need to make a big deal. I spend a lot of time with my kids these days. Every day is Father's Day."

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