

The Farm-Family Connection

**By Ann Diede, WSU Cooperative Extension
Chelan-Douglas Counties**

Many farm families in Washington involved in wheat, livestock and tree fruit production are experiencing economic stress today as a result of low commodity prices in recent years.

Since farming is a way of life and business that involves the entire family, it's important to remember that financial pressures from the farm operation also impact other family members. Spouses, children, parents, in-laws, and friends are all affected.

Many farm families find it difficult to admit they suffer stress overloads as a result of economic pressures. Some, who realize the severity of the situation, fail to see how it could affect family and individual well-being.

Impacts on Family Well-Being

Tough times bring out strong emotions in farm families. When farm men and women are under high levels of pressure, they often become irritable and take out their frustrations on others in the family. Stress often interferes with relationships among family members, creating communicating breakdowns, marital dissatisfaction, parent-child conflicts, separation and divorce, and verbal and physical abuse.

Family members typically react by turning away from each other. The family may become more isolated, stop participating in community activities, and spending time with friends because they don't want others to know. They are reluctant to seek help. This is especially true for men, who tend to feel it's their problem alone.

Make Family a Priority

What comes first, the farm or family? It's quite a balancing act for farm families. In most families, farm and family are closely connected and intertwined. When you think of a family farm, it can be hard to figure out where the family ends and the farm begins. However, during times of economic stress, this relationship can easily be forgotten. Keeping the farm economically viable becomes the top priority and family needs are often neglected or not taken into consideration. In times like this, it's more important than ever to remember to make family a top priority. What good does it do to devote all your time, energy and resources to the farm and lose your family in the process?

What About the Children?

Parents frequently become so preoccupied that they forget that economic stress has an emotional, as well as a financial, impact on their children. Parents often try to keep these difficulties from children, hoping they won't notice or be bothered by it. However, keeping information from children opens the door for mixed messages, confusion and tension. Kids are able to pick up on the tension and stress that adults are experiencing. They know something is wrong, even though they may not know what it is. They may think they are somehow to blame. Parents can help children by talking to them and giving them simple explanations they can understand. Children also need to hear:

- It's not their fault.
- What will remain the same & what will change.
- That even though it might not be easy, the family will be OK and you'll be able to work things out.
- Parents will continue to take care of them.
- Parents will take children's ideas and concerns into consideration.

A major study during the 1980's farm crisis tells us a great deal about the effects of economic stress in the lives of rural youth and their families. Perhaps the most relevant finding from this study is that economic stress causes problems for children because it disrupts parenting. In other words, income loss itself does not necessarily have negative effects on youth. It is the degree to which income loss affects parent interaction and parenting skills that matter for children.

How does this work? The study found that when conflict increases and marriage relationships suffer, the quality of parenting drops dramatically. Parents may become less involved, less nurturing, and less consistent in discipline. It's a family climate like this that puts youth at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including irritability, academic difficulty and delinquency.

What does this mean for today's families who are facing economic stress? One of the most important things to do is keep in mind the importance of maintaining and nurturing relationships with spouses, since marital happiness has such a strong effect on parenting and child health and well-being. Parents should also stay conscious of quality parenting practices, and identify and use community resources to help themselves deal with depression, marital tension and parenting skills.

Focus on Your Marriage

Tough times for farming can also mean tough times for marriages. When money gets tight or when a couple is facing financial loss and possible lifestyle changes, conflicts between married couples increase.

Studies of farm families in the late 1980's found that men become more negative toward their wives when there is economic distress. As husbands become more irritable and antagonistic, conflicts increase. Wives feel less affection and satisfaction with the marriage and are more likely to become angry and irritable as a direct result of their husbands' behavior.

So what can you do to help your marriage weather tough times? Here are some ideas to try:

- **Figure out how to fight fair** without attacking your spouse's character, making your spouse feel he or she is the problem, putting your spouse down and stonewalling or withdrawing during a conflict.
- **Care about your spouse's feelings.** Even at the height of an argument be thinking about what you can do to help the relationship.
- **Express love and appreciation.** A gentle touch or kiss and compliments are ways of showing you care.
- **Spend time with each other** doing something you both enjoy. Consider time with your spouse as an investment in both your family and your business.
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Be available to talk and listen without being critical.
- **Share responsibility for decisions** that affect the farm and family.

Maintain Healthy Family Relationships

Family members need to come together and support each other during stressful times. Here are some ideas to help keep your marriage and parent-child relationships stable and on an even keel:

- Keep communication open and clear. Be available to talk and listen to each others' concerns without criticism or blame. Show interest in what your children and spouse have to say.
- Share farm, parenting and home responsibilities. Hold family discussions to decide who does what so that no one feels overburdened. Take children's needs into consideration when planning.
- Find constructive ways to deal with anger so it doesn't destroy relationships with your spouse and children or get in the way of making good judgements and decisions.
- Do something fun with your family, spouse or children on a regular basis. Look for low-cost activities and entertainment. Create times to get away from farming by taking mini vacations or quick getaways.
- Remain active in social, school and community activities. Participation in school and extracurricular activities are important for both children and parents.

References: Deb Gebeke & Kim Bushaw (February 1994) FS-546 *Talking to Children about Tough Times*, North Dakota State University Extension Service; Stephen T. Russell (1999) *The Influence of Economic Crisis on Adolescents*, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension; Donna Donald (January 1999) *Tough Times Can Be Tough On Marriages, Choices for Change: Issues Facing Farm Families*, Iowa State University Extension. Information was also drawn from a variety of Cooperative Extension publications from Iowa State University, North Dakota State University, University of Illinois, Ohio State University, University of Illinois, and the University of Nebraska.