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Economic Impact on Kids

By Jean Follmer

Santa Claus may be broke this year. He may not be able to bring that \$700 game system. A Lafayette mom said the annual Tahoe family ski trip may be off this winter. The economic downturn is impacting more than our job security, our portfolios, our home values and our personal stress levels: it is impacting our families and our children.

A survey of some local child-driven businesses supports this. "Kids 'N Dance is down from about 350 to 190 students. It's devastating," said Kris Mueller, owner of Kids 'N Dance in Lafayette. "In summer, it (registration) was low. In fall is when I started counting. It's down to almost as low as when I started 15 years ago," said Mueller.

High-end children's clothing boutiques have also noticed a change. "I do think October was a tough month for most businesses. You have to be very creative and work hard to do well," said Laurie Ivry of Red Wagon in Lafayette.

Toys are not quite as evident. Handlebar Toys owner Lance Ghulam said it's hard to tell how the holiday season will be because there is always a natural drop in the 4th quarter leading up to the holidays. Ghulam believes that holiday gifts for children will be one of the last areas that parents will cut. "Buying a toy is cheaper than taking them on vacation," said Ghulam. He has, however, noticed a possible impact of the economic downturn. "There has been a pretty drastic cut in kids coming in and buying toys themselves," said Ghulam. Ghulam said it was not uncommon for local children to enter the store with \$20-\$30 in hand to buy a Lego set. "I think parents are watching that more closely," said Ghulam.

The economic downturn has impacted some children in ways beyond the acquisition of material goods and luxury of enrichment activities: it has changed family life. One Lamorinda mother told the Lamorinda Weekly how her family has been impacted by the economic downturn; her husband is an independent contractor and has experienced difficulty securing enough work in the area. The situation has forced him to regularly commute out of state for work. While the family would consider relocating to be together, they don't want to put their house on the market at this time. Although the children are currently enrolled in a private school, the family will be moving to the public school system next year.

Other Lamorinda families have suffered job losses. One family could no longer afford their mortgage payments after the father lost his job. They immediately put their house on the market and are uncertain about their future. Marriage and Family Therapist Margie Ryerson said the impact of job loss on children can be extensive. "Personally, I've seen many kids' parents lose their jobs over the years and it ultimately makes the kids more resilient and compassionate. But in the meantime it's embarrassing and even shameful for them. Of course, the fallout is a lot of anger directed at the parents who were supposed to protect them and some act out - misbehaving in school, slacking off academically and testing limits," said Ryerson.

These are tough times for many families and economists are not predicting a quick fix to the downturn. We need to be realistic with our expectations and more cautious in our spending. "It helps that many families are cutting back this year, even the ones with steady employment, but it's still a tough situation," said Ryerson.

Reach the reporter at: jean@lamorindaweekly.com

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