

Budgeting brings a power of good - The Marlborough Express, 15 September 2009

A year ago, the Matthews family had monthly power bills as high as \$450. Energy reporter Claire Connell spoke to the family of five, who have slashed their power bills to \$150 a month thanks to some good advice.

Craig and Sharon Matthews are hoping their family's new budgeting and power-saving skills will finally allow them to have a honeymoon 10 years after they married.

The Matthews family have slashed more than \$250 off their monthly electricity bill since April after taking on board tips from the Marlborough Budgeting Advice Service.

Before then, the couple and their three children, Crystal, 10, Samantha, 9, and Kasey, 8, ran up monthly electricity bills of up to \$450.

Mr Matthews, who has previously been declared bankrupt, has been on the unemployment benefit since he came off ACC for a back injury.

He is now job hunting, but because of his injury his options are limited.

The family get by on state support and money from Mrs Matthews' part-time cleaning job. In a regular week they have between \$230 and \$280 left after rent for food and electricity.

Late electricity fees sometimes up to \$60 per month have crippled the family in the past and they have come close to having their electricity cut off numerous times.

These days, however, the family are experts at saving power. Lights don't get turned on until 6pm, they use only the wood burner for heating, their clothes go in cold-water washes, and every light fitting has an energy-saving bulb.

Better budgeting has meant late penalties are a thing of the past, dragging the monthly bill down significantly.

They say they couldn't have got on top of things without the Marlborough Family Budgeting Service.

But even though they're something of a budgeting success story, Mr Matthews remains philosophical: "The power bills were just getting phenomenal. I thought, how the hell are we going to pay this? So that's when we went to Marlborough Budgeting Advice Service, and they gave us some good tips on how to do it.

"Now I've got it down to \$157 that's the limit I think!"

Mr Matthews now exercises strict discipline when it comes to the family budget.

He budgets for food, power, kids' school lunches, even icecream treats at the weekend.

"It's \$5 there, \$5 there, \$5 and then in a few months there's enough for their birthday present," Mr Matthews said.

"I started two months prior to the kids' birthdays and I go and buy something and hide it away, so when their birthday comes, I'm not breaking into my budget."

Budgeting service co-ordinator Joan Farrow gave Mr Matthews a helping hand in the beginning, and he's continued the good work.

But it hasn't been easy.

Mrs Matthews said it was hard shaking off old habits and there had been arguments when tension arose over how the money should be spent.

But she believed they were not struggling alone and there were lots of others in similar situations "but you don't see or hear about it".

For now, Mr Matthews is optimistic.

"We will get there eventually."