

Community Crises and Disasters

A Parent's Guide to
Talking with Children of All Ages



Community Crises and Disasters

A Parent's Guide to
Talking with Children of All Ages

Cynthia W. Moore, PhD and Paula K. Rauch, MD

A Project of
The Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time Program
Massachusetts General Hospital

MARJORIE E. KORFF PACT PROGRAM
PACT
Parenting At a Challenging Time



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER

About The Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time Program

The Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) Program at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) provides parent guidance consultation to parents, and their partners, who are facing cancer or other life-threatening medical illnesses. Focusing on honest communication to support children's resilient coping, the PACT parent guidance model is also being used to support military-connected families and families affected by community violence.

The PACT website offers in-depth information for parents and professionals about supporting a child's resilient coping through a parent's medical illness, collaborations with community partners to address a range of additional challenges facing families, and our MGH Cancer Center clinical services. Learn more at www.mghpact.org.

© 2015 Cynthia W. Moore and Paula K. Rauch

Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time Program
Massachusetts General Hospital
55 Fruit Street
Boston, MA 02114

ISBN 978-0-692-38362-9

Project Management: David Gerratt

Design: David Gerratt (NonprofitDesign.com)

Editing: Debra Simes (Wordslinger.net)

Illustration: John Berry

Printing: Recycled Paper Printing, Boston, MA



Caring for Yourself and Your Family

A tragic event affects everyone in a family. Parents and family caregivers will experience their own intense feelings that may feel unfamiliar or overwhelming, and may ignore their own emotional and physical distress. However, self-care is essential for maintaining stamina and coping with the impact of the event over time. Taking care of oneself is another way of taking care of one's children, and practicing self-care activities models for children an important part of coping.

Just as your child or teen should not be allowed to worry or struggle alone, neither should you or the other loving adults in your child's life. When anyone in your family feels overwhelmed, it is essential to seek help.

Staying Calm and Connected

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD offer a set of recommendations known as “Psychological First Aid” for mental health providers and emergency workers. These strategies—designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster healthy coping over time—may help focus parents’ efforts to care for themselves and children in the early days after a crisis. Four key points include attending to:

- **Safety:** for example, share clear messages about current risk; monitor media reports and address misinformation; find ways to make the physical environment more comfortable; focus on actions that are active, practical, and familiar
- **Calming:** for example, identify coping skills used in past that can help family members feel calmer; get back to routines; do familiar activities; have a comfort object for a child on hand
- **Connectedness:** for example, reconnect with loved ones or with people nearby in similar circumstances; make sure children know who their support people are and provide phone numbers of these people
- **Hope:** try to focus on positive expectations that things will work out as best they can in the next hour, day, or week, even if people feel overwhelmed

It is important to note that these ideas are recommended over an earlier approach called “debriefing,” which involved talking in depth about details of the events and reactions to what happened, often in a group setting. This type of debriefing discussion has been found to increase symptoms in the time after a crisis, contrary to expectations.

Self-Care Is Not Selfish

As time passes and the strain of caring for others takes a toll, your ability to continue to care for yourself is a powerful antidote to feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Although parents commonly describe feeling selfish by taking time to care for themselves, remember that you are the raft on which your children support themselves—if you sink, so do they.

Self-care doesn’t have to be expensive or time-consuming; consider these basic ideas:

- Stay connected by talking with someone about difficult thoughts and feelings. If a friend or family member is unavailable, consider a professional mental health provider. When anyone feels helpless, hopeless, or overwhelmed it is essential to seek help from a medical or mental health professional.
- Eat nutritious food, drink plenty of liquids, and be mindful of sugar and alcohol intake.
- Maintain physical activity and get adequate sleep.

- Try mindfulness meditation, spiritual practices, or yoga to reduce stress.
- Make time for fun and pleasurable activities: having something to look forward to can help you get through tough days.
- Carve out quiet time for yourself.

Seeking Professional Help

Sometimes, despite your best efforts to communicate with and support your child in different settings, he or she may continue to experience significant distress after a crisis. Or, you may feel that *you* need some additional support. Professional help may be the best next step.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Professional help should be considered if the following types of changes are noticed and last more than two to three weeks, or interfere with a child's day-to-day functioning (for example, make it difficult to go to school or engage in friendships or activities):

- a child feels sad, unmotivated, angry, irritable, anxious, or worried for much of the day
- changes in sleep, appetite, and/or energy level occur
- a child startles easily, has a hard time concentrating, or feels “numb”
- a child shows continued avoidance of situations, places, or things that are reminders of the crisis
- risky behaviors begin or increase (e.g., reckless driving, drug or alcohol use, breaking curfew, and/or self-harming behaviors such as cutting)
- an adolescent feels he is “going crazy”
- a child talks about wanting to die, or to be with a friend or family member who has died; in this case, an immediate evaluation is needed

Even after the death of a family member, not every child needs therapy. However, we recommend a low threshold for seeking help if a child has experienced a loss, particularly in the context of other ongoing stresses for the family. Also, if a child asks for help or suggests counseling, it is important to pay attention, as this is an unusual request.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

Help is available from a variety of sources. School-based resources, including guidance counselors, school social workers and psychologists, and school nurses, are usually easy to access during the school year. Even if your child does not want to meet formally with a school counselor, consider

making someone at school aware of your child's struggles, and creating a plan for your child to be quickly excused from the classroom for a break if she becomes distressed during the day.

Some children prefer to meet with a therapist outside of school, sometimes to maintain a feeling of normalcy during the school day and to avoid triggering difficult feelings. Your child's pediatrician may be able to provide names of local therapists who work with children. Friends, family, or clergy members may also have suggestions. Many insurance companies maintain mental health provider lists through the mental health/behavioral health benefits section of their websites. These are frequently searchable by zip code and populations served (for example, children, teens, people living with depression, grief, or traumatic experiences, etc.).

Websites can also be good resources for finding therapists, particularly those managed by national professional organizations for therapists. As with any professional service found online, it is important to check the person's credentials; some websites do independently confirm that a license is in good standing. Some websites that list many types of licensed therapists are included in the Resources section at the end of Part Two.

Even if your child does not want to meet formally with a school counselor, consider making someone at school aware of your child's struggles.

HOW DOES THERAPY HELP?

There are many types of therapy; some have been shown to be particularly effective in treating symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website describes a number of evidence-based treatments and the populations they target. [See the Resources section for the website URL, p. 97.] Many of these have core components in common, including a focus on helping children:

- understand the trauma, and put it in perspective (sometimes this is called creating a “trauma narrative”)
- connect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- label and clarify feelings
- learn positive coping skills (e.g., social support)
- learn skills for managing difficult feelings (e.g., breathing, relaxation)
- identify trauma and loss reminders, and strategies for managing them
- become desensitized to upsetting images or thoughts (often through gradual exposure)
- talk back to mistakes in thinking (e.g., feeling overly responsible), which helps decrease guilt

As parents, you also play an important role in therapy. You may help your child with therapy “homework,” and practicing new skills. You may learn new ways to support family relationships, and, perhaps most important, to support your child’s ability to be hopeful about the future.

TALKING ABOUT THERAPY WITH YOUR CHILD

Sometimes children resist the idea of meeting with a counselor. They may worry that anyone who sees a therapist is “crazy” or has “something wrong with them,” or may feel uncertain about what to expect and just find it easier to refuse counseling. Parents can sometimes help a child feel more comfortable trying therapy with these ideas:

- Let your child know that you will join him for the first session or two, if that would make him feel better.
- For older children and adolescents, let them know that they have the option to meet without you.
- Some children welcome the idea of having a place to talk about their thoughts and feelings about challenging situations. Others dread having to talk about feelings. Describing therapy as more like a coaching session to learn to manage upsetting thoughts better might be more appealing to these children.
- Let your child know you don’t think she’s done anything wrong, but that you are concerned about changes you’ve noticed, and want to help her. It’s common after living through a disaster or trauma to need some help and there’s nothing wrong with seeking it.

Accessing School Support

School plays such an important role in the lives of children and teenagers that for many, it is a second home. Educators (classroom teachers, school psychologists and guidance counselors, nurses, principals, etc.) are well-positioned to support students’ coping during a time of crisis

School plays such an important role in the lives of children and teenagers that for many, it is a second home.

and to identify individual students who are struggling in the aftermath. For some children, the structure of school is stabilizing, and returning quickly to a regular academic routine is most helpful. Other children—such as those who have a history of anxiety, depression, and/or behavioral or attention disorders—may be especially vulnerable to the stress of community crises, and may exhibit new symptoms or a return of previous symptoms.

Children who have a history of exposure to trauma may be more vulnerable to a new crisis, and may benefit from individualized support and monitoring during and after the crisis to support their positive academic and social experience.

Sorting out children's differing needs and deciding how to manage these differences, once identified, requires open communication—among staff members, and between parents and educators. Parents can assist educators by regularly talking to them about how their children are doing. Educators and parents can brainstorm together about the best ways to be in touch and collaboratively support these children. Middle school and high school students present a special challenge because they have many teachers, so a pervasive change in mood, behavior, and school performance may not be as apparent to any individual teacher. For this reason, it works best if there is a plan in place to coordinate information from all of a student's teachers to ensure that an "at risk" teen does not go unnoticed.

Parents can assist educators by regularly talking to them about how their children are doing.

COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOLS: A TWO-WAY STREET

The following tips for parents may be helpful as children return to school after a community crisis:

- Find out which kind of communication your child's school prefers, and use that when contacting the school. Educators are caring for many children at once, so anything you can do to facilitate easy communication will be appreciated.
- Provide your child's teacher and other educators with ongoing information about how your child is coping at home. Be open to hearing that they are seeing the same behavior, *or that they're not*. It is common for children to behave differently in different settings.
- Avoid having unguarded discussions about the crisis and its impact with school staff in front of your child. Children are able to sense your emotions and those of their teachers. If your child is present, be mindful of the ways you are speaking about the troubling events and involve your child appropriately in the conversation.
- Encourage school administration to share with parents in a timely way how the school is responding to the crisis. Are there school assemblies? Are teachers leading classroom discussions? It will be easier to talk with your child about their reactions to the school day if you know some of these specifics.
- Let the school know how your child responds to the school's efforts to support students. In particular, share the things you appreciate about their response and what is going well.