

Community Crises and Disasters

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



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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
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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.

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Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time Program
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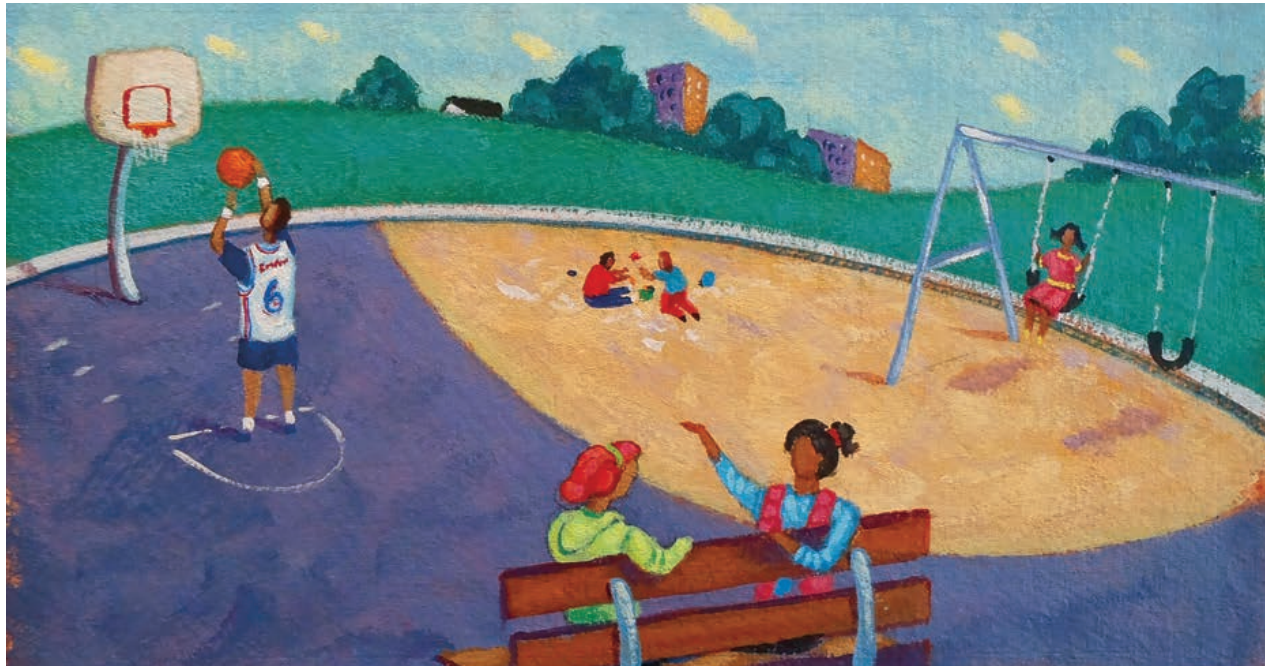
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Coping at Different Ages

Stressful events may impact children of different ages in different ways, because developmental stage affects how a child thinks about a crisis, manages emotions, and reacts to the social and academic demands in his life. Aspects of a child’s temperament, or consistent ways of responding to the world, such as flexibility, intensity, or calmness at “baseline,” may also affect adaptation in the face of adversity. For example, some children are slow to warm up in a new situation, while others engage quickly. Some easily adapt to a change in daily routine due to a crisis, while others have greater difficulty re-establishing a daily rhythm. Some children create a sense of security by playing quietly, while others thrive on physical activity in the face of disruption. Recalling your child’s unique reactions to stressful circumstances in the past can help you anticipate what these reactions may look like in a current crisis. For instance, knowing that your school-age daughter appears angry and even aggressive when she’s anxious may help you respond with more patience after she stomps off to her room and slams her door after being reminded of a community tragedy.

Infants and Toddlers (0–3 years)

During and after a crisis, babies and toddlers will be most affected by changes in routine and in the mood or attentiveness of the adults who care for them. Temperament is especially noticeable in these early months of life: some children adapt easily to changes in routine, and others exhibit greater distress in response to the same changes. Though children at this stage cannot understand more than simple spoken language, they are attuned to the tone of voice and the nonverbal communication surrounding them. Babies and toddlers can be irritable and fussy when caregivers are stressed, or can revert to fussy eating or awakening more often at night.

In spite of your best efforts, the regular schedule at home may be altered in times of crisis. It is very helpful for young children to have these routines restored as soon as possible. Conveying a sense of calm (despite what you may be feeling inside) during time spent with your very young child will help him or her return to typical mood and behaviors.

Children of any age can be challenging to care for when you are emotionally depleted in the aftermath of a crisis, but infants and toddlers, who require near-constant supervision, may be particularly taxing. This is an important time to reach out for support if you have access to potential helpers.

Sometimes, in the wake of a disaster, spending time with young children who do not have the capacity to understand the magnitude of an event or its long-term consequences can be a welcome break from the distress and helplessness that adults and older children may be feeling. Indeed, the sheer innocence of babies and toddlers can be a source of playfulness and hope.

Preschoolers (3–6 years)

A preschooler, who relies on regular daily routines and consistent rules and reactions from caregivers for a sense of security, understands a crisis via the ways it affects him directly. He does not yet have the capacity to think about the troubling events from another person's perspective. A preschooler almost always wants to be the focus of a parent's attention, but during times of uncertainty or disruption this is especially true. Because preschoolers often feel they are the cause of the changes around them, when parents seem sad or angry, children are likely to imagine that their behavior led to parents' distress. Also, when a bad thing happens to someone with whom a child is angry, it can elicit guilt and feel to the child as if she made the bad thing happen. These factors may evoke an array of behaviors in preschoolers, such as more clinginess and anxiety about separations, bedwetting, or more-frequent aggressive and defiant behavior.

Preschoolers will benefit from simple explanations about what has occurred and how it affects them. When you can, choose quiet, cozy places to talk with your child. Sit close together or have your child on your lap. Provide a short and clear reason for why there are so many visitors at the house, for example, or why preschool was cancelled for the day, or why it is not possible to have

a playdate with a particular friend. Simple language that names what happened (for example, there was a car accident or an ice storm), and tells why it is interfering with the child's and family's regular schedule, will help reduce the preschooler's confusion and tendency to feel responsible.

The more concrete you can be with explanations, the better. For example, you can help preschoolers understand that danger is not nearby by saying how long it would take to drive to the location of the event. Clarifying what affects the family directly and what does not is also important. For example, "The ice storm knocked down Carter's family's electric power line, but not ours. His house will not have electricity for his mom to cook their dinner tonight, so they are coming to our house for dinner." For some children this will be enough explanation, while others will have additional questions. For example, you might respond to the question, "Will Carter's family get electricity again?" with, "Yes, the power company will work every day until the power lines are working again for Carter's family and others without electricity."

Preschoolers often have questions that seem tangential to an adult, and it is useful to listen for the emotion behind the questions. When a child's questions have the tone of her typical chattiness and curiosity, this is a positive sign. When there seems to be pressure or distress behind the questioning, a parent may want to work harder to tease out what worry may underlie the questions so that the worry can be addressed.

Even young children may benefit from finding a way to help in a crisis. For example, you might ask your child, "Would you like to pick out some toys Carter might like for the two of you to play with together?" or "Do you think Carter and his family would like cookies or frozen yogurt for dessert?"

Though preparing your child for an unwelcome change may lead to protests and distress, it is better than leaving him to be surprised by a change.

If your child's schedule and routine change following the disaster, it is good to talk about this with him. Though preparing your child for an unwelcome change may lead to protests and distress, it is better than leaving him to be surprised by a change, and to continue to fear that other unexpected events will keep popping up. For instance, you might say, "While Daddy and Mike are in the hospital, Aunt Jen and Grandma will be your special babysitters after school. I need to be at the hospital during dinnertime today, but I plan to come home in time to read you a bedtime story tonight." Building in appropriate choices can help a child feel less helpless, too. "Can you pick out two books that we can read after your bath tonight?"

Preschoolers may imagine that disasters unfolding on the other side of the world are actually occurring nearby, or may imagine that the continuous replay of footage of disasters on TV represents new or ongoing disaster events. Children can also be easily confused by fictionalized representations of events on TV, and may think these are real occurrences. Preschoolers have little

ability to self-calm and are easily startled, so monitoring their exposure to these images is critical. Checking in regularly to find out what a young child has understood is very important. Young children may find it easier to communicate about frightening events using toys such as stuffed animals, blocks, or cars. They might show you, rather than tell you, what they think happened. It is easy to be unaware of a child's misconceptions; you can gather helpful information by encouraging adults in your child's life to share with you what they hear from your child about events. If your child will be spending time with another child, talk to the other child's parent to learn what has been communicated at their home, and to share what you have discussed with your child.

Elementary School–Age Children (7–12 years)

Elementary school–age children are learning a variety of new skills—academic, athletic, artistic, and social—and spending more time with different adults at school and in after-school activities, as well as with friends' parents. As their horizons expand, these children are likely to have more points of communication about troubling events through these new connections, and parents tend to be less aware of these interactions. For instance, it is much harder for the parent of a 10-year-old to know what that child has heard about a local or distant event than it is for the parent of a 4-year-old. Regularly inviting children to share what they have heard on TV, from friends, or from other adults is essential. Assume that, when they are around, children this age are overhearing much of what is being said about a crisis, and inquire specifically about any adult conversations to which they have paid attention. Keep in mind that they may be hearing conversations between adults outside of your family, which can lead to confusion and unaddressed worries.

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Seven-to-twelve-year-old children expect that the world will be predictable and fair, and that people will get what they deserve. For example, a child may learn rules, such as “wear a seatbelt” and “do not ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking alcohol,” because these are unsafe behaviors that cause accidents and injuries. This child is then likely to expect that a seatbelt-wearing person in a car with a sober driver will be safe. When a tragic motor vehicle accident that does not follow this perceived “rule” occurs, and affects someone in the child's life, it may feel particularly unpredictable and upsetting. The child's whole world may seem suddenly scarier and more out of control, thus affecting the child's overall sense of security.

All kinds of events can seem “not fair,” and therefore confusing to children—from receiving the smallest brownie, to having a nonsmoking parent diagnosed with cancer, to having a “nice” teacher slip and break a leg while a “mean” teacher avoided the accident. When children believe that a bad outcome is unfair, they may feel they are to blame because of something they did or failed to do. For example, a child might worry that her father's irritation at having to ask her several times

to clean up the family room caused him to be careless on the road, leading to an automobile accident. Another might share concern that he is “not praying hard enough” for a parent’s recovery, or that a sibling is not. If a child blames another person for a crisis or accident, he may experience revenge fantasies that punish the wrong-doer and help restore a sense of fairness. Usually these remain safely in the child’s imagination or are expressed through play or artwork; if a child shows signs of acting on these fantasies, professional support is needed.

Elementary school–age children may ask challenging questions about the unpredictability or unfairness of community crises; for example, why was one house safe during a tornado and another destroyed? Why do bad things happen to nice people?

It is usually best to be honest about life’s uncertainties while underscoring that you feel safe and feel your child is safe.

Children look to parents to help them understand why such events occur. Underlying many of these questions is the concern that if this bad thing happened to one person, how can the child feel confident that another person close to her—or even the child herself—will not also be affected? And, like many adults, children may be even more upset about an intentional action that

harms others. Why would a person purposely hurt so many other people? It’s not easy to answer such questions or provide satisfying reassurance, but it is usually best to be honest about life’s uncertainties while underscoring that you feel safe and feel your child is safe. It may help to identify the things you do, and that your child can do, to increase safety or health, as well as to explain in concrete terms how unlikely a feared event really is. Mentioning examples of the many ways people help and support each other, and modeling that you are hopeful about the future, can also help restore a sense of security.

Teenagers (13–19 years)

Teenagers can think abstractly, which means they can consider thoughts, theories, and emotions beyond the specific events associated with a crisis. For instance, they can imagine how a tragedy is experienced from the vantage point of individuals on all sides of the troubling event. However, their behavior often seems at odds with this theoretical understanding, which can be frustrating and confusing to parents. For example, a teen may one day discuss how a younger sibling needs to be protected from witnessing overwhelming television imagery, and then the next day watch such coverage with the younger child in the same room. Expecting your teenager to be understanding about circumstances that affect the family as a result of a crisis at some moments, but also, to be moody and self-absorbed at other times, may help you respond with less irritation—which, in turn, can help your teen to maintain emotional equilibrium.

Teenagers are striving to find a balance between emerging independence and continued dependence on key adults, such as parents. Much of the communication that occurs between teens, whether by face-to-face or phone conversation, texting, or Tweeting, will happen without parental awareness.

In the aftermath of a disaster, a teen's peer group plays a critical role in how the teen learns about events, and in the meaning-making that follows.

Teens are especially sensitive to nonverbal communication from parents. Further, they typically feel their own emotions intensely, and often experience an adult response as more emotionally intense than the adult perceives it to be. The challenges facing parents at times of crisis can easily lead to distress that may be either related or unrelated to the teen. It's helpful to be aware of any nonverbal messages that may inadvertently shut down communication with your teen at these times. It is especially important during and after crises to find out what your teen may be thinking, from whom he or she has been getting information, and what her or his emotional responses to the crisis are. Parents should not imagine that because teens have easy access to information, they can easily integrate that information into a balanced worldview or coherent understanding of the crisis.

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Teens may have powerful reactions to an event, or may have friends who are very distressed or at risk in the wake of the disaster. Encourage your teen to share the reactions of friends as well as her own. It may help to ask a teen if he or she wants you to share thoughts or just listen quietly. If you sense or hear that your child or a peer is not safe, then listening alone is not enough. But otherwise, listening, and giving your teen time to bring together many perspectives and arrive at some independent meaning, can be a step in building lifelong coping skills.