

Community Crises and Disasters

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



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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.

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Preface

At 2:47pm on a beautiful, sunny Boston Marathon race day—Monday, April 15, 2013—two bombs exploded near the downtown Boston finish line, seriously injuring more than 250 runners and bystanders, and taking the lives of two young adults and a 10-year-old boy. Because it was Patriots’ Day—a school holiday—many of the spectators were Boston-area families with young children, there alongside fans from around the world to cheer on the runners.

As the perpetrators were sought during the next several days, a young security officer and one of the suspects was killed, and a police officer seriously injured. Then, four days after the Marathon, all public transit was suspended, and Boston-area citizens were asked to stay inside their homes as police, FBI agents, and National Guard members engaged in door-to-door searches, and military vehicles patrolled neighborhoods. On April 19, the search resulted in the apprehension of the second suspected bomber.

A makeshift memorial was created in downtown Boston at the site of the bomb blasts. “Boston Strong,” in signature Marathon blue and yellow, quickly became the logo and the slogan for the Boston community to come together. The events around the Marathon bombing caused both visible and less-visible damage. Communities near and far expressed solidarity and offered whatever support they could to victims and others affected by the events. For all the devastation and loss, there was also heartening evidence of the good in people.



Parenting Through Crisis: A Quick Guide

This section underscores the key points you may want to keep in mind as you support your child during a crisis and through its aftermath. The information is addressed in greater detail elsewhere in this handbook, but often, at stressful times, “less is more.” These highlights may be as much as you want to read during a crisis or may serve as a useful overview of the recommendations found in this handbook.

- **When talking with children, be descriptive, but objective.** Words like “catastrophe,” “tragedy,” or “disaster” may unintentionally raise children’s anxiety. Focus instead on the first four “Ws”: what happened, where and when the event occurred, who was affected, and importantly, who was *not* affected. The fifth “W”—why this happened—is usually better addressed in later conversations. Remember that your emotional tone is as important as the words you use. It can be extremely difficult to help your child feel calm when you, yourself, are not feeling calm. As best you can, be aware of your tone of voice when talking to children, and to others around your children.

- **Be aware of all the ways in which your child may be learning about the events.** There are so many channels that troubling news can come through: television, radio, the Internet, texts from friends, other social media, overheard conversations at home or out in the world. The more you know about how your child is learning about news, the better you can address inconsistent or incorrect information.
- **Welcome all of your child’s questions.** Though you may be anxious about sharing too much information with your child, encourage her to ask you anything, so you are aware of how she understands the situation, and what is confusing. Telling a child that she asked a good question, and that you need some time to come up with a good answer and will get back to her, *and then doing so*, is preferable to discouraging or avoiding conversation.
- **But don’t wait for questions to talk with children.** Older children frequently learn of world events at the same time as parents, if not before! Even if your child understands the “four Ws” and rolls her eyes when you ask if she has questions, you have an important role in helping her make sense of the events and the world’s response to them.
- **Don’t let your child worry alone.** Encourage your child to share his worries with you. Choose check-in times that correspond with when your child is most likely to be willing to talk. Car rides, bedtime, and side-by-side activities like washing dishes seem to be “talking times” for many children.
- **Convey confidence without promising that nothing bad can ever happen.** You may very much want to reassure your child of his safety, now and in the future. On the other hand, it is important not to make promises that can’t be kept. If your child asks if something bad could happen again, consider talking about the fact that it is not impossible, but is very, very, very unlikely. Giving concrete examples of extremely unlikely events can make this idea more readily understood by your child.
- **As much as possible, maintain your child’s usual schedule.** Regular routines provide a sense of security and normalcy. When this is impossible, provide as much predictability for your child, day by day, as you can. Emphasize what will be same about her routine, and describe what will be different. “Even though we’re staying at the Red Cross shelter tonight, I’ll still tell you a story when it’s time for bed, and you’ll have your favorite blanket.”
- **Keep the channels of communication open with key caregivers,** such as grandparents, teachers, babysitters, coaches, and the parents of close friends. Talk to these people about what your child understands about the events and any concerns about your child’s response, and ask that they let you know about any changes in your child’s mood or behavior.

- **Respect a child's wish not to talk very much.** Some children talk about all kinds of things, and others tend to think things over more on their own. All children need basic information about important events, especially about details that will affect them. But it's OK if your quieter child doesn't want to have a big discussion, even though you may feel worried that he is hiding distress. Rather than pushing him to talk, watch for changes in behavior at home or school, and with friends, for clues about how he is coping. Encourage him to express feelings through art, writing, or imaginative play.
- **Be aware that older children may be poor judges of how exposure to media coverage of a crisis affects them.** Like adults, adolescents may feel pulled to learn as much as possible about a challenging event, and you may not want to discourage their curiosity. However, too much exposure to media tends to make both adults and children feel worse, and teenagers may not yet have learned that this is the case. Simply keeping the television or computer off may not be helpful advice for many families, but talking with your child about the importance of limiting time exposed to news, and helping her find other ways to spend time supports a useful skill as she becomes an independent consumer.
- **Look for positive, realistic messages that resonate with your family values.** Although this may not be possible in the early stages of a crisis, doing so over time helps families adjust to challenges with resilience. Some families focus on the importance of gratitude, on appreciating the many helpers in any difficult situation, on the importance of being responsible and aware of surroundings in certain situations, or on finding ways to help others. Others emphasize the importance of asking for help when it's needed, and asking again if help isn't offered right away. Be cautious about creating a narrative that connects many disasters around the world into a frightening pattern that a child would not have arrived at herself.
- **Find ways to engage with your community after a crisis.** Children, like adults, often find that being an active helper is one of the most powerful ways to regain a sense of control and optimism. Guide your child toward age-appropriate ways to become involved in your community, for instance, raising money for a cause related to the crisis, writing letters to people affected directly, or for older youth, learning about advocacy roles within a variety of organizations.

About the Authors

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As much as we might wish that children could grow up in a world free from disasters and crises, at some point, all families are faced with unexpected and upsetting situations. At these times, children and teenagers rely on parents and other trusted adults to help them make sense of what has happened, and parents respond in ways they hope will support children's emotional health and resilience. This isn't easy—it can be difficult both to help children feel safe when parents themselves are uncertain, and to know how much to tell children about upsetting events and what to say, especially when children of different ages are living at home.

Community Crises and Disasters: A Parent's Guide to Talking with Children of All Ages is designed as a resource that parents can turn to in a time of crisis, or ideally, in advance of a crisis. It provides practical information about children's reactions, and ideas about how to support their healthy coping. Stories of three families facing different types of crises illustrate these ideas, and provide a starting point for discussions about supporting children. In addition, detailed suggestions about how to talk with children after a crisis or disaster, with tips for different age groups, accompany each story.

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The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds
Developing Resilience through Engagement, Awareness and Media

