

# 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

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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](http://www.mghpact.org).

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## Making Choices about Media Use

Especially during a community crisis, disaster, or tragedy, children of all ages are exposed to a wide range of messages and images through traditional and non-traditional media. Older children increasingly get their information and communicate with peers through texts, posts, and Tweets. Parents need to be proactive in supervising a child's or teen's exposure to media and use of technology, and fully engaged to help interpret the incoming information. During stressful times, children and teens may seek immediate answers to their questions from the Internet or peers rather than from parents, so it's easy for parents to be unaware of a child's questions—and the answers she may be finding. A search engine never says, "Ask an adult you trust." Too often, virtual "conversations" can be emotionally intense, upsetting, or misleading, and may go on for some time without a distressed child or teen seeking parental support. Whether by limiting access to too much TV coverage, intervening in troubling exchanges, unplugging during mealtimes to enable family conversation, or making sure phones are off during sleeping hours, parents need to be active in gauging, and perhaps limiting, a child's or teen's media exposure and/or technology use.

Technology—particularly cell and smart phones—is part of family safety planning, too. Parents, teens, and even younger children rely on phones to connect during emergencies. The expectation that family members can always reach each other can inadvertently lead to inadequate planning. In a crisis, a phone may be disabled, lost, or uncharged. It is important to know where your child will be, have a backup plan for connecting if phones do not work, and determine a meeting place if you are separated.

## Be a Savvy Media Consumer

Help your children put what they learn from a range of media sources into perspective by sharing these facts:

- news shows are part of the TV business, which makes its money on numbers of viewers and ad sales; the goal is to keep you watching; increasing the hype or the “stay tuned” message is intended to keep you from turning off the show
- crises, disasters, and tragedies are “news” because they’re rare: they happen less often than all the positive, ordinary, and usual events; by showing so much of what is negative, sensational, and upsetting, and so little of the “good,” media can make it seem as if terrible things are far more common than they really are
- TV can make people feel anxious; less TV is often a good choice
- information on websites is often inaccurate: some sites are far less trustworthy than others, so encourage children to consult adults for help with this
- when surfing online, unwanted and disturbing images can easily pop up; suggest that children seek any online information about troubling events with a parent

Middle school and high school–age children may also be able to understand that:

- different TV stations represent different political ideologies
- arguments about current events, including disasters and crises, are often one-sided
- it is hard to tell a complicated story in a short sound bite
- anything can be found on the web, but teens may not be ready to absorb it alone; encourage them to search with a parent or trusted adult
- making sense, together, of what has happened goes way beyond acquiring information

## Be a Good Role Model

Adults, like children, often have trouble disengaging from the TV or Internet. This is especially true when a crisis is unfolding. It can feel critically important to stay on top of new information, and parents may worry that turning off the computer or TV will mean missing important updates. It is worth thinking carefully about the costs and benefits of spending many hours following news coverage, both for your children's benefit and your own.

- recognize that it's hard to turn off the TV, even when you know you should
- be aware of what kind and how much media exposure is best for your own emotional well-being
- be prepared to talk with your child about other ways to get information and news (for example, print media, Internet, radio), and where you get your most helpful information
- disasters are likely to be discussed in the news many times, including at times related to anniversaries, trials, repair of destruction, etc.; be aware that this coverage may re-activate worries in children or adults
- bear in mind that talking with your child involves more listening than talking
- seek input from other parents you trust and admire, especially those who are most tuned into media and technology

## How Much Is Too Much?

Under each age category, we offer suggestions for regulating media/technology exposure:

### PRESCHOOLERS (3–6)

- do not show preschoolers adult news coverage
- check in regularly to learn what a preschooler may have seen or heard
- it's preferable that a parent learn about a troubling event and then convey the information in an age-appropriate way to a young child
- children will not understand how media footage and commentary relate to their personal safety
- preschoolers are too young to assess the when, where, or how of a crisis on TV, or to differentiate fact from fiction

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE (7–12)

- news coverage should be watched or listened to with a parent present
- ask questions to see if the content or images are troubling
- watch for emerging anxiety or specific worries following media exposure
- make the use of technology contingent on turning it off after a designated amount of time
- no technology for one hour before bedtime and during the night (this is important for sleep health)
- visit websites together

## TEENAGERS (13–19)

- technology should be turned off during meals (parents should follow the same rules)
- turn off all sounds associated with incoming messages at night (if a teen is not able to unplug for the night, technology needs to be removed from the bedroom)
- spot check texts and posts with a teen to get a sense of what those conversations are like; if posts or texts are upsetting, talk together about limiting, or taking a break from, distressing communication (e.g., Facebook, texts with a particular peer, etc.)
- technology should not interfere with meals, schoolwork, or outside activities

## Managing Media

So that you can better manage children’s media use, rather than having media “manage” your children (or you), we offer some questions to start conversations that can go beyond, “Haven’t you spent enough time on the computer?” Learning from children about how they find information of interest, evaluate the quality of the information and its source, and react to the different modes through which information is conveyed (images, text, audio), may provide a window into their experience of a world that can be both stimulating and challenging to navigate.

## TALKING ABOUT MEDIA USE: SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO TRY

- In what ways are you getting information? Which are the fastest? Most accurate? Least useful? Scariest?
- Who is in the conversation? Who maybe should be, but isn’t?
- Is the conversation “smart,” or is “dumb” stuff being texted, Tweeted, posted, etc.? (Perhaps ask if you can see the back and forth of your child’s exchanges)

- What is an example of something smart that got you thinking?
- What is an example of something stupid?
- What mean or threatening things have you seen online?
- Have you seen images you wish you had not seen? What are the worst pictures or videos you've seen?
- Do you feel able to turn off the TV, stay off Facebook, or take a break from texting?
- Do you trust what you are seeing (on TV, the Internet, Facebook, etc.)? How do you decide whether you trust a source?
- What have you noticed about TV coverage? (For example, have you noticed that newscasters repeat the same information and images, that they have excitement in their voices, etc.?)