Parenting Through Crisis

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 is not always easy.

Parenting Through Crisis: A Quick Guide is adapted from *Community Crises and Disasters: A Parent's Guide to Talking with Children of All Ages.* For quick reference, key parenting principles from the guide are outlined here. We recognize that parents know their own children best, and we encourage you to tailor these recommendations to meet your child's unique needs.

The guide was created through a generous gift from the employees of Fidelity Investments after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

To learn more about the Korff PACT program at MGH, see *www.mghpact.org*.

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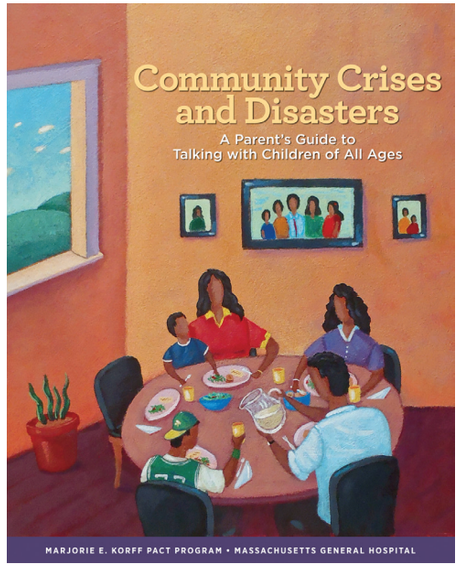

Community Crises and Disasters: A Parent's Guide to Talking with Children of All Ages

by Cynthia Moore, PhD and Paula Rauch, MD was designed as a resource that parents could turn to in a time of crisis, or ideally in advance of a crisis. It provides practical information about children's reactions to crisis at different ages, and ideas about how to support a child's resilience and facilitate open communication.

A free download of the full Guide is available at *www.mghpact.org*.

For more than a decade, the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) Program at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center has provided parent guidance consultation to parents and their partners, who are facing cancer or other life-threatening medical illnesses.

Through our many years of clinical practice, we have learned that at stressful and emotionally challenging times, parents appreciate practical suggestions for what to say or do to support their children. *Parenting Through Crisis: A Quick Guide* provides ideas about how to talk openly about a crisis or disaster in ways that support children's resilient adjustment.

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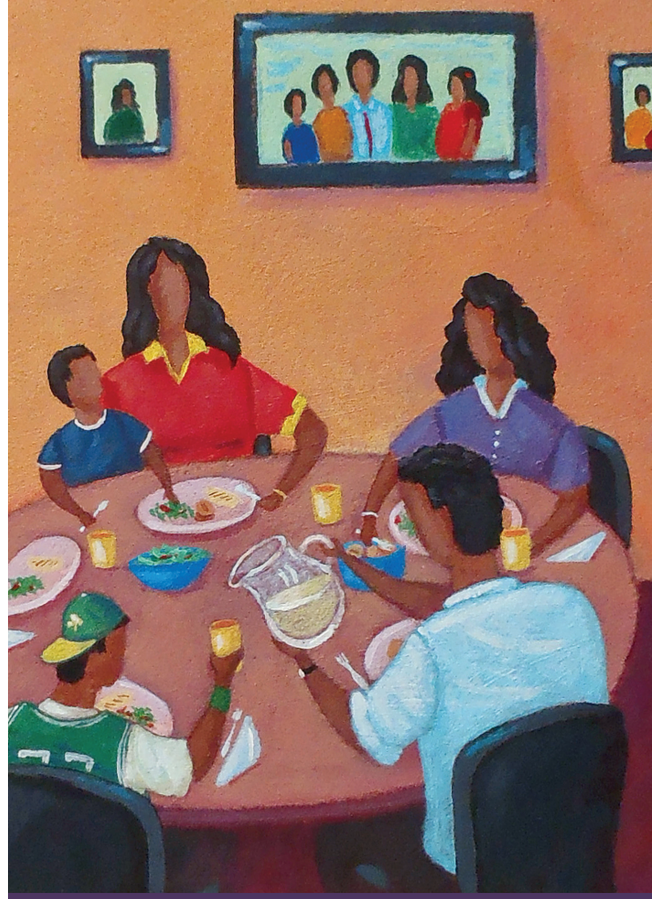
Parenting Through Crisis

A QUICK GUIDE



MARJORIE E. KORFF PACT PROGRAM
MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

Parenting Through Crisis

A QUICK GUIDE

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 children are 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 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 children of their 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 children.

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 children, day by day, as you can. Emphasize what will be same about the child's 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 the child's response, and ask that they let you know about any changes in the 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 okay 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 your child 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 children about the importance of limiting time exposed to news, and helping them find other ways to spend time supports a useful skill as they become independent consumers.

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.