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.

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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.
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 a more objective manner.

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 that nothing bad can ever happen. 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 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.