

# 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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55 Fruit Street  
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ISBN 978-0-692-38362-9

Project Management: David Gerratt

Design: David Gerratt ([NonprofitDesign.com](http://NonprofitDesign.com))

Editing: Debra Simes ([Wordslinger.net](http://Wordslinger.net))

Illustration: John Berry

Printing: Recycled Paper Printing, Boston, MA



## 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.