

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
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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.



Stories of Families Facing Crisis

What follows are three stories about families navigating different types of crises in their communities. As you read, you might imagine what you would say and do in a similar situation, as a way to practice and feel better prepared for a crisis. As you do this, reflect about the challenges you have already faced as a family, and how you handled it with your child or teen. What worked well for your child? Were there aspects you wish you had handled differently?

You might also use these stories to start discussions in your neighborhood or school, or among friends. Brainstorming about how to respond when you are not under the pressure imposed by an actual crisis gives you the chance to rehearse potential explanations and consider conversation “starters.” Each story offers an opportunity to reflect on the family and community values you would like to emphasize with your own child, and what you would want her to gain from the experience. Through conversations like these with children, we can help them build tools for coping that they will carry with them as they grow.

It is important to note that we have created composite stories collected from years of clinical experiences; no story represents any single, actual family. If a reader believes she recognizes her own story here, it is coincidental. We have elected to highlight different types of challenges, and different kinds of families, to increase the likelihood that parts of each story might resonate with your experiences and potential future challenges.

Following each story are examples of things you might actually say to your child in the wake of a crisis similar to the one in the story. You can adapt these for your own comfort and circumstances, or just use them as prompts for thinking about what you might say to your child. These samples are organized by theme and by age group so you can easily find what’s most relevant for your needs.



Living “Boston Strong”

A Story about Violence in the Community

Suzanne and Carl Brook live in Cambridge with their three children, 16-year-old Isaiah, 13-year-old Ava, and 6-year-old Marcus. They have always loved attending the annual Boston Marathon and cheering on the runners. The Marathon route runs from Hopkinton in the western suburbs into Copley Square in the heart of Boston, and they have a favorite viewing spot about a mile before the finish line. Suzanne had taken her two older children to watch the Marathon every year when they were younger, and she planned to take Marcus for the first time this year. The streets are always lined with cheering fans from all over the world, shouting encouragement to each runner that passes by. Ava loved handing out water to the runners when she was Marcus’s age, and Suzanne hoped that Marcus would enjoy the excitement and helping the runners, too.

The Morning of the Marathon

The morning of the Marathon, the Brook household was busy with preparations. Carl had a regular work-day and headed off to work at 8am. Isaiah left with two of his friends before 10am to take the subway to

Boston. Suzanne was comfortable with Isaiah's plans for the day; he and his friends had gone together last year, and Isaiah knew how to use the subway to get around. She knew he had his cell phone with him, so she hadn't asked for specifics about the boys' plans. Experience had taught her that even had they made plans, they would likely change as the day unfolded. She simply reminded Isaiah to be home for dinner and asked if his cell phone was charged. Meanwhile, Suzanne had arranged to meet up with one of Marcus's classmates and his family at 11am, about a mile before the finish line at their usual viewing spot.

Ava was the challenge. At almost 14, she really wanted to go to the Marathon this year with only her friends and not with someone's parent. Suzanne was frustrated that in spite of many, many texts and phone chats, the girls still hadn't worked out their plans. All morning, Ava was still hoping to have an arrangement with her friends, but it never came together. Their indecision resulted in Suzanne, Ava, and Marcus ending up at home that day.

Suzanne called and apologized to the mother of Marcus's friend for cancelling. Ava and her mom were both disappointed, but Marcus didn't seem to mind playing at home. At midday, the three of them watched the Marathon on TV together as the elite runners crossed the finish line. Watching from home wasn't very exciting and after a few minutes they turned off the TV.

Bombs Explode at the Finish Line

Just before 3pm, Ava came running into the kitchen to tell her mother that she'd gotten a text from her friend Tess. There was an explosion at the Marathon. Tess had told Ava that lots of people were probably hurt or dead. Suzanne couldn't believe that this could be true, but they rushed to turn on the TV. Suzanne was shocked, and immediately thought of Isaiah, who was at the Marathon somewhere. Last year, he and his friends had walked the last mile of the course and had gone in and out of the stores near the finish line. She exclaimed aloud over and over again, "Oh God," and "I can't believe this," as she repeatedly called Isaiah's cell phone but failed to get through to him. She knew he was with two of his friends, but didn't know their cell phone numbers.

Suzanne was shocked, and immediately thought of Isaiah, who was at the Marathon somewhere.

She was standing in front of the TV watching the coverage, still frantically trying to reach Isaiah, when he called on the house phone. Ava had texted him and told him that Mom wanted to talk with him. Isaiah sounded relaxed. "You heard about the explosions, Mom?" Hearing Isaiah's voice was such a relief. "Where are you? Are you near the bombs?" Suzanne asked. Isaiah explained that the boys had gotten bored around 1pm, and had walked back to another friend's house to listen to music. He was calling from there. Suzanne felt like she could breathe again. She later learned that cell phone calls were not being transmitted and only texts were getting through. She was thankful that she hadn't spent longer in limbo, unsure whether or not Isaiah was safe. Every time she thought this, she felt guilty for feeling so relieved when other families were not so fortunate.

Marcus on His Own

In the moment, Suzanne hadn't been thinking about what Marcus was experiencing. At some point, he had come out of his bedroom and joined his mother and sister in front of the TV. He had heard his mother's worried exclamations as she watched the coverage of the breaking story on TV, and had watched her panicky attempts to reach Isaiah on his cell phone. Marcus had been watching the news footage, transfixed, and listening to the anxious tone of newscasters sharing the breaking news. He had heard his mother's relief when Isaiah called.

When Carl called a few minutes later, Suzanne walked into another room to talk with him. She wanted privacy to share with her husband her unfiltered horror about the explosions. She needed

Marcus had been watching the news footage, transfixed, and listening to the anxious tone of newscasters sharing the breaking news.

to share with him how terrified she'd been before hearing Isaiah's voice on the phone. She talked about how easily she could have been at the Marathon with the children, and how Isaiah and his friends could have been at the finish line and been badly injured. Ava might have been there with her friends without an adult present, and could have been right where the bomb detonated. It was a relief to share the litany of scary "what ifs" with her husband. They wondered together who they might know who could be injured. Carl knew colleagues at work who had family members running

in the Marathon, but it was too soon to know if anyone had been hurt.

In that moment, Suzanne wasn't thinking about Marcus or Ava at all; they were in the physical safety of their home. It was only later that she realized that she hadn't spoken directly to Marcus, or really seen what he was observing and how he was reacting to the breaking news. Nor had she checked in with Ava about her ongoing virtual conversation with friends.

While his parents talked, Marcus asked Ava what was going on. She barely looked up from her phone—so many of her friends were sending texts, and updates were streaming in on Facebook and Twitter. She told Marcus that bombs were going off at the Marathon finish line. Marcus imagined that there were many, many bombs and that they were still exploding. He pictured airplanes dropping bombs on the Marathon runners. It was scary and confusing. He'd seen how upset his mother was—more upset than he ever remembered seeing her. He wondered if their house might get bombed. When Suzanne came back into the living room, she found Marcus watching the same footage on the TV over and over again with a breathless announcer describing a chaotic scene. Ava was sitting on the couch texting on her phone and occasionally looking up at the TV.

Talking Together Begins

Suzanne gave Marcus a little hug. She could see that he was confused and upset. She wanted to talk with him in a quiet place away from the TV, but she had trouble pulling herself away from

watching the coverage. She knew she needed to turn her focus to Marcus, and that she should turn off the TV, but it was harder to do than she would have imagined. When she did, Ava didn't seem to mind, perhaps because she was getting most of her information via her cell phone.

Suzanne put her arm around Marcus as they walked into the kitchen together. Marcus asked her where Isaiah was and if he was getting bombed. She reassured him that Isaiah was at Sam's house listening to music and that they were safe. Marcus asked if Daddy's work was getting bombed, and if his building was stronger or weaker than bombs. After being reassured that his father was safe, he asked if their house was going to get bombed. Suzanne recognized that Marcus was scared and confused about what was happening, where it was happening, and whether the events were ongoing, and that she needed to address some basic questions and worries. She did not know that Marcus was still listening for bomber planes as he had not shared this worry with her.

Turning off the TV was harder to do than she would have imagined.

Initially, Suzanne was focused on making sure that her family was physically safe. Because of her fear for Isaiah's physical safety, she had not immediately recognized Marcus's perception that he and his family members were in danger. The emotional cues Marcus was getting from his mother, the images on TV, and the news anchor all conveyed to him that he should be very, very scared. And he was. But as Marcus and his mother walked together, the physical comfort of her arm around him and his mother's attention led to his spontaneous questions. After answering his immediate questions about Isaiah and his father and their safety, Suzanne asked Marcus, "Do you know what happened at the Marathon?" Marcus nodded.

"What?" she asked.

"The runners got bombed," Marcus said.

Had Suzanne then asked Marcus, "How do you think it happened?" she might have learned that he thought the bombs were being dropped from planes.

She responded, "Yes, there were two bombs that exploded at the Marathon, near the finish line. After those two bombs exploded there were no more bombs. The finish line is far away from Daddy's work, far from where Isaiah is, and far away from our house."

"Are you worried about Daddy, or Isaiah, or us?" Suzanne asked. Marcus looked at his mother's face and paused. Then he shook his head. No, he was not worried. "I am glad," his mother said, "I am not worried about us, either."

"Could you tell that I was worried before I knew where Isaiah was?" Suzanne asked. Marcus said nothing. She continued, "I was worried then, but not now. I know he is safe at Sam's house. I was so surprised that a bomb exploded. It has never happened before at the Marathon in more than

100 years. I was also very upset, because some people got hurt.”

“Who?” Marcus asked.

“As far as I know, no one that we know,” she answered.

Suzanne asked Marcus to tell her what he heard her saying to Isaiah and to his Dad. She was reassured that Marcus reported back—accurately—a couple of questions she’d asked them on the phone. She also asked Marcus what he’d seen and heard on TV. Marcus said he’d seen lots of old men falling down, and ambulances. Suzanne explained that it was the same older man falling down, shown many times. She agreed that there were lots of ambulances there, which was good because they could take people to the hospital. Marcus asked some unrelated questions about ambulances and fire trucks that he had seen and asked his mother if she remembered them. His mood was noticeably more relaxed. Suzanne helped Marcus bring some of his toys into the kitchen, and got him settled there to play.

Checking in with Ava

Suzanne found Ava in her bedroom with her phone and her laptop. She sat down on Ava’s bed.

“Who are you texting with?” she asked. “I’m wondering what you and your friends are saying to each other about all of this. Can I look over your shoulder and read some of the texts?”

“I’ll show you,” Ava said. Suzanne came over to Ava and put a hand on her shoulder. Suzanne knew that Ava would normally bristle at being asked to show her mother her private conversations, but this wasn’t a normal circumstance. Ava walked her mother through the communication thread, explaining who had sent which texts. Tess was sure that two girls they knew had been at the Marathon finish line.

Suzanne read Tess’s text aloud, and then asked some questions. “How does she know that for sure? And how are you girls getting news and information about this?” Ava told her mother people were sharing everything they heard from one other. Suzanne wondered aloud if some things people thought were true might turn out to be false. Ava agreed that this was likely. She knew that one boy from her Spanish class, rumored to be at the finish line, was actually in Virginia visiting his grandmother.

Suzanne asked Ava, “What do you think about what we saw on TV, and how are you feeling?”

“It is horrible, but it is sort of hard to believe it is real and not a movie,” Ava replied. Suzanne agreed.

“Are you ready to take a break from your phone and laptop and do something with me?” she asked. Ava headed to the kitchen with her mother, but stuck her phone in her pocket.

Isaiah Arrives Home

Suzanne hugged Isaiah when he came through the door. Ava and Marcus were watching a movie, so she had some time alone with Isaiah. Curious about what he would share with her, she asked, “Walk me through your day after you left home this morning?” When he didn’t say much, she continued to try to get more information out of him, asking, “Where did you end up going along the Marathon course? Did you see other people you know at the race? How did you hear about the bombing? Was it strange knowing you’d been right there a couple of hours earlier? Were you worried about anyone you know being there when the bombs went off? Did you guys hear of anyone you know getting injured? What else did you and your friends do in the afternoon before you got home at 6?”

Isaiah listened to his mother’s questions and responded with short answers. He poured himself some juice but seemed reluctant to sit down and talk. Suzanne decided to find another time to learn more from him, or see what Isaiah might share more easily with his father when he got home. Isaiah was never much of a talker, and experience had taught her that he would often open up later and on his own schedule. So she said, “Thank you so much for calling home when you did. As soon as I heard the news, I was worried about your safety.”

Isaiah was never much of a talker, and experience had taught Suzanne that he would often open up later and on his own schedule.

Suzanne

When she spoke the next day with her sister, a teacher in New Jersey, Suzanne reflected on what she might have done differently. “I will never again complain about Ava being a disorganized planner. I am so glad that she wasn’t there with her girlfriends. Even without getting hurt, the thought of them trying to figure out what to do when cell phones weren’t working sends a shiver down my spine. I wish I had been more tuned in to Marcus and what he was taking in when we first learned about the bombing. I wish I’d told Carl that we were safe, and that I’d called him back after settling Marcus. Ava was so into texting with her friends, I don’t know how much attention she was paying to what was on TV. But poor little Marcus thought our house might blow up, that bombs were continuing to go off, and that his Dad might not be safe. I usually overprotect him, but yesterday I kind of forgot about him for a little bit. I didn’t find out until last night, when a plane flew overhead and Marcus looked terrified, that he thought the bombs were dropped from airplanes.

“I think I know what is on Ava’s mind today because she’s talking with me. Isaiah answered all my questions, but I have a feeling that there’s more he’s thinking about than I have any idea about. He’s more likely to talk with Carl, so we’ll see what comes out, if anything. Carl suggested I talk to his friend Sam’s mother again this morning. Sam is a talker, and he shared a lot of worries about what might have happened had the boys not gotten bored at the Marathon when they did.”

Next Days

For most public school children around Boston, the Monday of the Marathon begins a week of school vacation. Some families were away that week, but the Brooks were home with no special plans. Since Monday evening, it seemed that every couple of hours there was more news about someone who had been personally touched by this community disaster. The media were buzzing

The impact of the bombing was becoming more and more real and the hunt for the perpetrators had intensified.

with information about the suspected bombers and stories about the three individuals who died (including one child just a little older than Marcus), as well as stories about many people who were injured. Everyone seemed to know someone with a personal story. Carl had a co-worker who was at the race with his family and was close enough to feel the shock waves after the blast. Carl's cousin was on the police force and involved in the

manhunt. Suzanne had a friend who was an ER nurse and was coping with the memories of all that she saw that day. Isaiah and Ava each had friends who were along the Marathon route. Two of the teachers from Isaiah's high school ran the Marathon, and he'd heard that if his social studies teacher hadn't stopped to use a portable toilet, he would have been at the Marathon finish line at the exact time the bombs went off. There were many heartwarming stories being told, too, including many individual acts of kindness and all kinds of support from across the country.

With the stories on the news, and media coverage of people who were close to those who suffered the most, the Brook family all felt like the impact of the bombing was becoming more and more real. At the same time, the hunt for the perpetrators had intensified. The city of Boston was being treated as a crime scene, and the National Guard, local police, and the FBI were treating the events as an act of terrorism on U.S. soil. Everyone's anxiety seemed to be heightened.

At Home and Afraid

Marcus and his 5-year-old neighborhood friend JT had a playdate on Tuesday afternoon. Suzanne listened in on the boys as they played. It wasn't uncommon for Marcus to have his Transformers and his Lego guys fighting each other or blowing things up, but as Marcus and JT played together there seemed to be many more explosions than usual. She noticed that Marcus was using a toy plane to drop pretend bombs on his Lego spacemen. Suzanne was surprised to see how much the boys were enjoying the play. She wondered if she should say something to them, but they looked happy, so she decided not to interfere.

Ava had committed to babysit a neighbor's 4- and 9-year-old daughters on Thursday morning. Suzanne called the neighbor, Cheryl Dannon, to find out whether she still wanted Ava to babysit, and what her girls knew about the bombing. Cheryl said she'd love to have Ava come over, even if she didn't end up going out to do her intended shopping that morning. She'd not told the girls

anything and didn't want them to know about the Marathon bombings. She said her ex-husband had agreed with her about trying to keep it a secret, though she wondered if Lily and Bella would end up hearing something about this when they went back to school. Cheryl wondered what Suzanne had said to Marcus, and the two women talked about how different it could be when there were teenagers at home.

Suzanne shared what she'd learned with Ava. Bella and Lily hadn't been told anything about the bombing, but that didn't mean they definitely didn't know anything about it. Cheryl did not want Ava to talk about it in front of the girls and if she heard anything from them, she should let Cheryl know privately what she'd heard. She reminded Ava that when she was babysitting, she shouldn't be talking on her phone with friends or even texting. It might be hard to stay focused on the girls, but that would be her job that morning.

Suzanne had been keeping the TV off, but had been listening to the radio during the day to keep up with the evolving information. She planned to watch TV only for a short time each night after Marcus went to sleep. In part, her plan to limit TV time was to protect Marcus, but it was self-protective, too. She found the images terribly upsetting. They kept showing the older man being knocked over by the power of the blast and the many bloody, injured runners and bystanders immediately after the explosions. Suzanne remembered that after 9/11, watching the TV coverage made her more upset and she had struggled to get some of those images out of her mind. Because she couldn't undo the events of Monday, and watching the TV wasn't helping her be a calm parent, she was trying to take good care of herself and model this for her children.

Suzanne had been keeping the TV off, partly to protect Marcus, but it was self-protective, too. She found the images terribly upsetting.

Finding the Suspects

As the suspected bombers were identified and the manhunt intensified, anxiety in and around the family seemed to be growing. Marcus was upset that they hadn't caught the "bad guys" yet; he couldn't understand why the police didn't just catch them and lock them up. He wasn't feeling safe to sleep in his own bed. Even though his parents had explained that the bombs were not dropped from an airplane, the sound of helicopters overhead scared him. His parents reassured him that they felt safe in their house, but Marcus remained unconvinced.

Ava had been staying up late talking with her friends. She wished she hadn't committed to doing the babysitting on Thursday morning. She asked if she could watch Bella and Lily at her own house, because she, like Marcus, didn't feel safe. Suzanne thought it was a good idea and suggested that they plan to make cookies together with the girls on Thursday.

Isaiah had denied feeling worried and hadn't wanted to talk much about the bombings, until Wednesday night. While watching TV with his father, he said he been thinking a lot about what his life would be like if he had been one of the people who lost a leg. He wondered what it must be like to live in a country at war. Since this had happened, it felt different to hear about

Isaiah struggled to make sense of this news that hit so close to home. Each parent supported Isaiah by acknowledging that this was hard for them to understand, too.

explosions causing fatalities in Iraq or Afghanistan. Carl was glad that Isaiah was sharing his thoughts, and listened carefully until his son finished talking. He agreed with Isaiah that the bombing so close to home had him thinking about things he didn't often consider. "It reminds me of how lucky we are not to be worrying about our safety or survival every day," he told his son.

When the two suspected bombers were identified on Thursday, Isaiah was shocked to learn that the younger of the two had attended his high school a couple of years ahead of him. He had not imagined that the perpetrator of this awful event would be someone from his school. His friends were talking about this, too. He knew several people who had known the bomber, and they described him as a "regular kid." He was on the wrestling team and was in college now. Isaiah was really troubled that a "regular" person could do something so horrible. It didn't make sense to him and it left him feeling like anybody might turn into a killer or terrorist. Separately, Carl and Suzanne listened to Isaiah struggle to make sense of this news that hit so close to home. Each parent supported Isaiah by acknowledging that this was hard for them to understand, too.

Suzanne did most of the listening and talking with Ava. "I think you're going to be hearing lots about this from friends, and on TV, and probably at school next week." She talked about how things as rare as this could feel overwhelming, and were hard for all of them to understand. She reminded Ava that it would be important to talk about it, and also to take breaks from thinking about what had happened. Ava responded by talking about wanting a break from news about the bombing. Suzanne found herself redirecting Ava at least a couple of times a day to engage in something other than communicating with a friend, such as cleaning her room, helping make dinner, using her camera to take some photos, or watching a movie with Marcus.

Sheltering in Place

Friday morning, the Brooks woke up to the news that their community, along with several others, was being asked to "shelter in place" during an intense search for the bombing suspects, who were believed to be in nearby Watertown and "armed and extremely dangerous." No one was to go outside on this beautiful April day, so that law enforcement could do their job unencumbered. Many neighborhoods were being searched by service members, even SWAT teams, with military weapons.

The Brooks didn't want to scare Marcus, but they decided that it would be better to tell him that the police and National Guard were patrolling and might visit them, rather than having him be shocked and surprised if they arrived without warning. Marcus seemed pleased that the good guys were going to catch the bad guys. He was less scared than his parents had expected. He asked several times if they had come by yet and seemed to be looking forward to the visit.

Ava and Isaiah were more troubled by the door-to-door hunt and corresponding lockdown. Ava felt a heightened sense of risk knowing that the suspected bomber was likely somewhere nearby. Though she had initially been excited to see the stores from their neighborhood on national TV, that excitement had turned into anxiety once the lockdown began. The Brooks spent the day at home together. Carl and Suzanne allowed Marcus to play computer games for a while, and later he and Ava helped Suzanne bake brownies. Bella and Lily were at home with their mother, and Suzanne chatted with Cheryl so her neighbor felt less alone. Carl pulled out a 1,000-piece puzzle and tried to convince Ava and Isaiah to work on it with him. Though he ended up doing most of it himself, each sat down with him a few times to talk and help with finding puzzle pieces. By the evening, one suspect was dead and the other one had been captured.

Isaiah found himself imagining what it would be like to be the younger, surviving suspect during the manhunt. He worried that maybe it was a mistake and the suspect didn't know that his older brother had intended the attack. He wondered if he was being stupid to think that one brother could brainwash the other. None of the horrible events seemed to make sense to him, and he was ill-at-ease and irritable with his family. He claimed not to care what his classmates thought of any of this, but things he said suggested he was aware of, and troubled by, some of their reactions. Each of his parents checked in with him before bedtime, but he was not interested in talking. They reminded him not to worry alone. Suzanne said, "Remember, if you tell us what is on your mind rather than leaving us guessing, it's likely that we will be less annoying. It's better to worry with you instead of about you."

Isaiah said, "I just wish he wasn't from my high school. Everybody will think this is what we are like."

"Huh. I hadn't thought about that," Suzanne said. "I am not sure that anyone will really think that, but it is upsetting that it's somebody from our neighborhood."

Meanwhile, Ava had seen very graphic pictures of the injured online, and told her mother that she couldn't get them out of her head. She was doing a lot of pacing and checking her phone during the day, and several friends claimed they could hear gunshot sounds. She'd gotten texts from a good friend who said her immigrant family was fearful about potential anger and violence that

Ava had initially been excited to see the stores from their neighborhood on national TV, but that excitement had turned into anxiety once the lockdown began.

might be directed at their ethnic community. Ava wanted it all to be over, but her friend's worries about the future reminded her that it was not.

Marcus, who had been most worried initially, seemed happy that the bad guys were finally caught, and was now the least worried.

Boston Strong

Initially, the area around the bombings was treated as a crime scene and was closed to all but law enforcement. But when the area was re-opened to the public, a memorial was spontaneously created. Flowers, notes, and running shoes were placed there in memory of those who died or in honor of those injured.

Many of Ava's and Isaiah's friends and their families visited the makeshift memorial. Ava did not want to go, but Isaiah did. He planned to go with his friends, but Carl wanted them to share the experience, and convinced his son to go with him. Isaiah's friend Sam had not wanted to go, but his mother thought he should. Carl offered to go with Isaiah and Sam, but Sam did not want to join them. In talking with Sam's mom, Suzanne shared that she was letting Ava not attend because she seemed to need longer to adjust to the recent events; Suzanne was concerned that pushing Ava would not help her and might perhaps make her more anxious. Sam's mother ultimately chose to let Sam opt out of going, and ended up going to the temporary memorial with one of her good friends on the day before it was disassembled. She realized that she really needed and wanted to see it and she'd been pushing Sam because she'd wanted him to go with her. This plan suited both of them better.

Carl and Suzanne made a point of having the family eat dinner together most nights for the first few weeks after the Marathon.

Carl and Suzanne made a point of having the family eat dinner together most nights for the first few weeks after the Marathon. Suzanne spent extra time with each of the children after school to hear about their days. She asked Ava and Isaiah if teachers or friends were talking about the Marathon during the first several days when they were back at school. By the third week, the conversations about the Marathon were less frequent, but she let them know that she hoped they'd continue to share their thoughts and feelings, as well as input from others.

The One-Year Anniversary

As the first anniversary of the Marathon bombing approached, it was in the news every day. Suzanne and Carl took the opportunity to talk about it again with each of their children. They talked about the many heroes and survivor stories that they'd heard during the year. Isaiah was looking forward to the trial. He hoped that some of his questions would get answered in court,

though he was pretty sure no one would help him understand what went on in the suspect's mind, which was his real question.

Isaiah and Ava were glad that so many people were coming to Boston to run. It felt good to be part of "Boston Strong." The Marathon felt more festive than in any previous year, but not as carefree. Marcus and his friend pointed out the many runners in funny outfits and convinced Suzanne to let them get noisemakers to cheer on the runners. Isaiah went again with his friends and Ava went with Suzanne, Marcus, and a couple of friends. Ava was a little bit nervous, but she believed that all the extra security made it safer. She was glad she went, and happy when it was time to go back home. The family talked about their plans to attend again the following year.



Talking with Children about Violence in the Community

1. Provide a simple explanation of what is happening or did happen, and describe the immediate impact on the child. Though you may want to shield your child from bad news if she was not directly affected, consider whether this is realistic, particularly if your child could overhear or see information on the radio or TV, or learn about the events from peers or older siblings.

AGES 3–6

- “Two bombs exploded at the Marathon, not in our town, but in Boston. After those two bombs exploded there were no more bombs. We are safe, and so is Daddy at work, and Isaiah at his friend’s house. You might hear me talking with other people about this on the phone.”
- “The police are looking for the people who set off the bombs the other day, and they might come to our door to see if we know anything about where they are. They are carrying guns and might look scary, but they are here to protect us.”

AGES 7–12

- “Two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon today. A lot of people got hurt and have been taken to hospitals. Police are looking hard for the people who did this. Right now the TV and the Internet are showing this story over and over, so I’d like us to turn the TV off. I’m going to be on the phone to make sure your brother is OK; I’ll check in with you when I get off the phone.”
- “The police think they are getting close to finding the bombers. The police and the National Guard are out searching, and they might come to our house, and to other houses in our neighborhood, while they’re looking. This is a tense time because we have to stay inside, but there are many people around who are keeping us safe while they are searching for the suspects. I’m sorry that we won’t be able to go the Aquarium as we’d planned.”

AGES 13–19

- “Two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon today. A lot of people got hurt and have been taken to hospitals. Police are looking for the bombers. You’ll probably be hearing about this from your friends, if you haven’t already, and it’s all over the media.”
- “The police think they are getting close to finding the bombers. The police and the National Guard are out looking, and they might come to our house, as well as other houses in the neighborhood. Our town is on lockdown so we have to stay inside. I’m sorry that you won’t be able to hang out with your friends after all.”

2. Or, if your child already knows what happened, find out about his or her understanding of the events, and address any worries or misunderstandings.

ALL AGES

- “What did you see and hear?”
- “What else do you know about this?”
- “What are you wondering about?”

AGES 3–6

- “Tell me what you know about what happened.”
- “What did you hear when I was talking on the phone?”
- “Do you know what [sibling] was talking about with her friends?”
- “What did you see on TV?”
- “What is scary or confusing about this?”
- “The bombs came from the street, not from airplanes, so we don’t have to be afraid when we hear airplanes overhead.”
- “There were only two bombs, and the people who left them on the street ran away, so now the street is safe again.”

AGES 7–12

- “If _____ (another child) asked you what happened, what would you tell him?”
- “If _____ (a familiar adult) asked about what happened, what would you tell her?”

- “Try to tell me the whole story of what happened and let’s see what else I may know and what nobody knows yet. We can figure out together what happened.”
- “Do you have any worries about this, now that you know what happened?”

AGES 13–19

- “What have you heard about what happened today?”
- “What are you hearing from your friends? How about on the Internet?”
- “Do you have any concerns about this, for you, anyone in our family, or your friends?”
- “What do you think about this?”
- “Are you worried about how you are feeling, or how this is for anyone you know?”
- “I know you’re hearing that a lot of people were killed, but from what I understand, that’s not really known yet. When people are so scared, it’s easy to get ahead of what the facts are; the media do it and your friends are probably doing that, too.”
- “Just because your best friend texted you with this update doesn’t mean we should count on it being 100% accurate. Where is she getting her information? We need to take things slowly.”

3. If your child has witnessed your distress, acknowledge your feelings and talk about why you were feeling that way.

AGES 3–6

- “Could you tell that I was really surprised? Did you know why I was so worried?”
- “A bomb explosion in Boston is very, very rare. It has never happened in my whole life. I was really surprised by this news and worried about Isaiah [sibling] being near there. It’s upsetting that people have been hurt. I am glad that Isaiah called and is safe.”

AGES 7–12

- “How did you think I was feeling when you heard me on the phone? You’re right, I was really upset. The news of the bombing made me really worried about your brother and our friends at the finish line. I was so surprised that this happened because nothing like this ever happened before, and we hope it won’t ever happen again.”

AGES 13–19

- “I know you heard me on the phone with Dad and I probably sounded pretty panicky. This kind of thing can be pretty scary when it’s happening, and was a real shock. I’m calmer now; how about you?”

4. Let your child know that more information will be available later. Try to describe what is known and not yet known, focusing on the details that will matter most to your individual child.

AGES 3–6

- “The police and special police, called the FBI, will have to figure out who did this and why.”
- “Isaiah [brother] is fine, and so is Daddy. We’ll find out what they heard and saw when they come home later.”

AGES 7–12

- “We still don’t know if anyone we know was hurt today. So far, we do know that the Garcias and the Wrights are fine. The only other people we know who were near the finish line were the Smiths. We’ll let you know when we get any updates.”
- “After we learn more about what happened, we should try to understand it better together.”

AGES 13–19

- “We still don’t know if anyone we know was hurt today. So far, we do know that the Garcias and the Wrights are fine. The only other people we know who were near the finish line were the Smiths. We’ll let you know when we get any updates. Will you do the same for me?”
- “After we learn more about what happened, maybe we can check in again.”

5. Let your child know you will follow up with him or her in coming days, and that you want him or her to come to you with any and all questions or concerns.

AGES 3–6

- “Will you come find me if you’re feeling scared or sad?”
- “Please don’t ever worry alone. I want you to tell me [or another trusted adult] if you’re scared.”

AGES 7–12

- “If you learn more, or hear more, or have questions, will you let me know?”
- “Now that you are getting ready for bed and it is quiet, what are you thinking about?”

AGES 13–19

- “Keep me posted about what you’re hearing from your friends, and on TV and the Internet, OK? You will probably be ahead of me!”
- “I’ll be curious about how this affects you in the next few days. Even though you’re pretty independent these days, this kind of event can really shake someone of any age, and I want to make sure you’re OK.”

6. Over time, ask children to talk about how they, and people they know, are coping, and how they are thinking about what happened. Try to get children thinking with you about helpful and less-helpful ways to manage during difficult times. Let them know it’s normal to have a lot of different feelings and reactions after a frightening event.

ALL AGES

Help children and teens find individual ways to cope that work for them:

- Talking with a parent, teacher or friend
- Listening to music, reading, drawing, making something
- Meditation, yoga, exercise
- Eating nutritious food, getting enough sleep
- Playing outside, playing a board or video game
- Watching funny videos
- Turning off the TV, phone and Internet

Point out that some reactions might feel easy right away, but cause problems later:

- Worrying alone, not talking to anyone
- Breaking things, yelling at people, punching a wall
- Refusing to go to school or do homework
- Not spending time with friends
- Avoiding situations that cause anxiety
- Staying up all night
- Drinking alcohol, smoking, taking someone else’s medicine
- Hurting yourself

AGES 3–6

- “So many things have happened this week. Let’s take some extra cuddle time and talk together.”
- “I hear an airplane overhead. I know you were scared when you heard an airplane before we talked about where the bombs came from. Are you feeling better this time?”

AGES 7–12

- “Have you had any questions or worries when you are lying in bed trying to go to sleep? Do you have worries or feel scared—here, at school, or at a friend’s house or another place?”
- “Are you worried about anyone in our family? What have you noticed?”
- “Where do most of your friends go for answers to things they wonder about (the event)?”
- “Did any of your teachers talk about (the event) at school today? What did they want you to know?”
- “With all the things we’re hearing about (the event), has anything surprised you or seemed strange?”
- “Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you or I or someone did something different?”
- “We’ve been trying to talk and check in about (the event), and I’m wondering how we’re doing. What grade would I get for listening and answering questions?”
- “I’ll tell you what I like to do to relax or to feel safer.”
- “What kinds of things help you feel better when you’re upset?”
- “What kinds of things make you feel a little better right away when you’re upset, but could make bigger problems for you later?”
- “It’s pretty normal to (feel more worried for a few days or weeks; want to do comforting things like watch a movie; want to stay away from where the event occurred; want to visit the place the event occurred; want to learn more about the details of what happened; not want to talk much about what happened)... But let’s be sure to check in again in a few days so we can make sure you’re starting to feel better, not worse.”

AGES 13–19

- “What are you learning about what happened from your friends, the media, and other adults you know?”

- “Are you worried about how you are feeling or how this is for anyone you know? Is anyone else worried about how you are doing?”
- “Do you ever have ‘what ifs’ on your mind?”
- “Is anyone you know having an especially hard time? How can you tell?”
- “How does the response of the police and the community feel to you?”
- “Did any of your teachers talk about (the event) at school today? What did they want you to know?”
- “With all the things we’re hearing about (the event), has anything surprised you or seemed strange? What is the stupidest thing anyone has said about (the event)?”
- “We’ve been trying to talk and check in about (the event), and I’m wondering how we’re doing.”
- “What does somebody who has not lived through (the event) not understand about what it’s like?”
- “What is different about how you and your friends are coping with (the event) from how we (parents) are coping?”
- “What kinds of things help you feel better when you’re upset?”
- “What kinds of things make you feel a little better right away when you’re upset, but could make bigger problems for you later?”
- “It’s pretty normal to (feel more worried for a few days or weeks; want to do comforting things like watch a movie; want to stay away from where the event occurred; want to visit the place the event occurred; want to learn more about the details of what happened; not want to talk much about what happened)... But let’s be sure to check in again in a few days so we can make sure you’re starting to feel better, not worse.”

7. *Think about how you want your child to make sense of this event going forward, and what life lessons you hope are learned, and look for ways to talk about this. Try to focus on resilience, survival, and hope.*

AGES 3–6

- “People can get really mad, but most people find ways to be really mad without hurting other people or hurting themselves.”

AGES 7–12

- “Sometimes bad things happen by accident and sometimes people are so angry or so confused that they hurt others on purpose. It is hard to understand why someone would hurt so many people on purpose. What we can do is . . .”
- “Yes, bad things do happen, so it’s important to work together to take care of each other.”
- “There are bad people in the world, it’s true, but there are also many, many good people. Look at all the people who jumped in to help right away—the police, emergency medical technicians, ambulance drivers, doctors, nurses, firefighters, and regular people who helped the people who got hurt.”
- “The guys who set off those bombs are definitely bad guys, but there were a lot of heroes, too. Who do you think acted like a hero?”
- “Over the next few days or weeks, we can think about whether we can do something to help the people who got hurt.”
- “What is the hardest part about this?”

AGES 13–19

- “How would it be different for you if it was an accident and not an intentional act?”
- “It is really hard for me to imagine why someone would be so angry that he or she would hurt someone else, and even strangers. How do you understand what happened?”
- “Over the next few days or weeks, we can think about whether we can do something to help the people who got hurt.”

About the Authors

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Community Crises and Disasters

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

Cynthia W. Moore, PhD and Paula K. Rauch, MD

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.

MARJORIE E. KORFF PACT PROGRAM

PACT

Parenting At a Challenging Time

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The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds
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