

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
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.

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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.





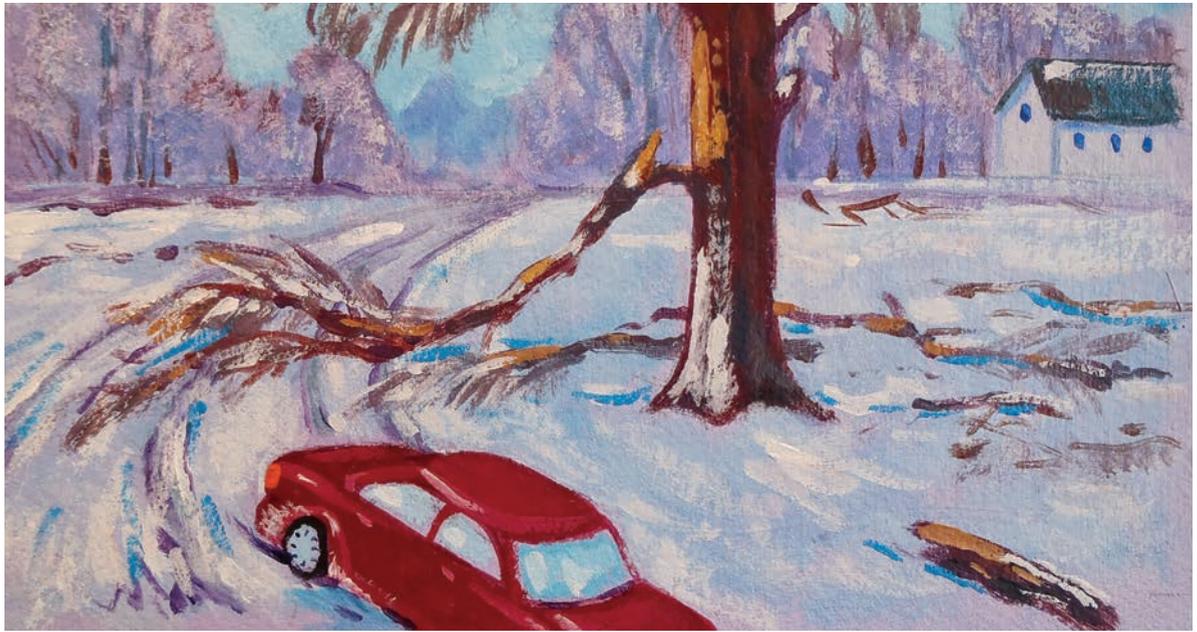
Stories of Families Facing Crisis

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.



Weathering the Storm

A Story about a Natural Disaster

At the end of October in New England there was a week of unseasonably cold weather and a massive ice storm. There were 12 hours of heavy freezing rain, accompanied by 40–60 mile-per-hour winds. Because so many trees had not shed their leaves, a great deal of ice clung to and weighed down the branches. This weight plus the high winds led to unprecedented numbers of downed trees and tree limbs that took down many power lines. Northern Massachusetts, southern New Hampshire, and part of Vermont were hardest hit. Many families were without power for more than a week. In some communities, families whose homes rely on well water, but who had no generators for their well pumps, were without water during the outage—and many were without heat, as well.

In one small town of 6,000 residents, the storm resulted in two deaths. The principal of the elementary school was in a fatal car accident on his way home from visiting a friend, and a popular store owner, who was the grandfather of five children in the local school system, slipped on his back steps, hit his head, and died. There were many small car accidents, some causing minor injuries, during the early evening when

the storm began. Fortunately, children were already home from school before the roads became treacherously icy.

Damage throughout this town was extensive. One estimate was that a quarter of the trees were damaged in this one storm. A large oak fell on the town library, splintering the roof and landing on the librarian's desk. Luckily, the library was closed, so no one was injured. Ten homes in the town suffered such significant damage that the residents were forced to move out. Most publicized was a family whose 6-year-old son heard a crash, and then saw a huge tree branch pierce through the roof and into his bedroom, missing his bed by fewer than five feet.

Bill and Jen Green, parents of two boys—4-year-old Cody and 9-year-old Brandon—counted themselves fortunate. They listened to reports on the radio about the ice storm and the damage, but were safe in their three-bedroom home. They lost electricity, but had a woodstove and enough food and water to stay warm and well through the stormy Tuesday night and all of the next day. They used candles and flashlights, and the boys seemed to be enjoying a couple of days without school. It was a family adventure.

It was a little challenging to keep the boys busy inside the house without TV or video games. They played games together most of Wednesday; in the afternoon Cody spent some time “helping” his mom while Brandon played with his Legos. Bill had gone outside briefly that morning, but the ice was so slippery that he decided they should all stay inside for the whole day. County and town officials had encouraged residents to stay at home as long as they could do so safely. There were a lot of power lines down and the state police wanted the roads clear for clean-up and for emergency vehicles access.

Thursday morning was a little warmer, the ice was melting, and main roads had been cleared. The Greens were confident they would be able to drive to a supermarket, a few miles away, for food, bottled water, and other supplies. After two long days inside, Jen decided all four of them should go on the outing together.

Jen and Bill had heard about storm damage and were curious to see it for themselves. They'd been following the news on their smart phones and knew that the storm had hit parts of three states hard. The night of the storm, they'd heard the wind blowing and trees snapping. Nonetheless, they really hadn't realized how serious it was or what the local damage was until taking the drive together on Thursday. They hadn't thought to say anything to prepare the boys.

Storm Damage

The destruction they saw was unbelievable: several homes were completely destroyed, barns were caved in, and a car was crushed under a big tree limb. In their small town, they knew the families in many houses, and it was shocking and awful. Bill and Jen talked with each other about each of these families, and who they might be staying with if their houses were not habitable. Brandon

asked who they were talking about and Bill told him that they were not people he knew. Brandon was silent. Little Cody seemed excited about the damage and proud of spotting destroyed or broken things to point out to his parents. “Look at that tree. Look at that house!”

They decided to take a short detour to drive down Main Street and see their public library with the tree leaning on it and the roof smashed. They had heard about the library being damaged, but seeing it was worse than they had anticipated. The parents talked about how upset the librarian must be and voiced their own dismay again. Brandon was quiet until they stopped in front of the library. “What happened to the library?” he said in an agitated voice. “Who is going to fix it?”

“I have no idea,” his father said. “It’ll take forever to fix this.” Both parents were surprised that Brandon started crying.

“Don’t say that!” he said.

“You don’t even like going to the library,” his mother said.

“Yes, I do,” insisted Brandon.

“Could have fooled me!” his father said. Brandon turned away, looking out the window, sullen and silent.

Cody chimed in, “I like to go to the library, too,” and Brandon scowled at him.

Brandon’s mood seemed to brighten at the supermarket. His mother asked him to pick out easy-to-prepare foods and sweet treats like donuts and cookies. The prospect of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, chocolate chip cookies, and donuts for their “at home” campout seemed to change Brandon’s attitude. So Jen was especially surprised when Brandon turned to Cody and said, “You can’t eat any of the donuts. They’re all for me.” Cody reached out to grab the donut box away from Brandon, and uncharacteristically Brandon hit him, hard. Cody wailed. Jen returned the donuts to the store shelf and said that Brandon’s behavior convinced her not to get them. Brandon sulked.

“I like your idea of what to do, but in an emergency, usually Dad and I will tell you what to do and we’ll take care of Cody.”

Anxiety in the Air

When they returned home, Brandon just wasn’t himself. He complained of being bored, but didn’t want to play with any of the toys that he usually enjoyed. Jen had initially thought that he had a case of cabin fever, but when she suggested that he could go outside and shoot baskets in the driveway, he refused. He clearly wanted to be with his mother, but she wasn’t sure what was bothering him.

While Jen put away the groceries, Brandon sat in the kitchen and watched her. When she asked him directly what he was so mad about, he denied being mad. “If you are not mad, are you grumpy?” She asked. Brandon was silent. She wondered if seeing the storm damage had upset him, but he didn’t seem sad, he seemed angry. “What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“What happened to the people in the smashed car? Could they get out?” Brandon asked.

“Which smashed car?” Jen asked.

“That blue one in front of the house next to Peter’s house,” Brandon said impatiently.

“I don’t think anyone was in that smashed car, because it was in their own driveway,” his mother replied. “If someone had been in it, I think I would have read about it in the news.”

Brandon barely seemed to listen to his mother’s explanation. “If I saw the tree falling, I would have taken off my seatbelt and lay down on the floor in our car. Then the tree wouldn’t have hit me,” he said with conviction. “But I don’t know how to get Cody out of his car seat to lie down on the floor. He never listens to me anyway. What if you and Dad were too big to lie down on the floor and you got killed?” he asked.

“That didn’t happen,” his mother said.

“It could have happened!” Brandon insisted.

“The car was in the driveway and I am sure the family was inside their house,” Jen said. “Anyway, we didn’t go out at all Tuesday night. We were just at home.”

“I know,” said Brandon “but if the tree fell on our car, how would you and Dad keep from getting crushed? I can’t take care of Cody. He doesn’t listen to me.”

“Wow!” said Jen. “You’ve really been thinking about this! It is really, really rare that trees fall on cars with people in them. I have heard of it, but I’ve never known anyone who was in a car when a tree fell on it.” She paused and saw that Brandon was thinking about what she’d said.

“No one you know?” Brandon asked.

“No,” said Jen.

“It could happen,” Brandon repeated.

“It could,” his mother agreed. “I like your idea of what to do, but in an emergency, usually Dad and I will tell you what to do and we’ll take care of Cody. You are a pretty good listener, so you’ll be good at doing the right thing in an emergency. Remember the time the wastebasket at Grandma’s caught on fire and Dad put it out? You were a really good listener in that emergency and stayed back like Dad told you to. Remember the time we got a flat tire and I asked you to stay in

the car while I phoned for help? You were a great cooperator then, too.”

“I was good at the fire drill at school, too. Mikey and Evan weren’t,” Brandon said. “They were talking, not listening, and they got in trouble with Mrs. Johnston.”

“I didn’t know about that,” Jen said. “I am proud that you were a good listener and I am sure Mrs. Johnston appreciated it, too.”

“If Grandma asks you to tell her about this storm, what would you tell her?” asked Jen. Brandon described the ice storm and the wind that knocked down trees. He also described their trip to get food because the stove wasn’t working without electricity.

“What else did you notice on our drive?” she asked Brandon. Brandon described many of the damaged homes, fallen trees, and the library. He also mentioned the men he’d seen cutting up the downed limbs and a power company bucket truck with a workman up in the tree. Jen said, “Wow, you noticed a lot of things. I am glad you remembered that we saw the people who are working hard to fix the power lines and clean up the tree branches. Did you know that Sarah’s dad works for the power company and he is one of those helpers at work after this storm?”

“I am glad this storm is over.” Jen said. “I am glad that we are all safe and we didn’t have any damage at our house. Do you feel safe?” she asked Brandon.

“Sure,” Brandon replied.

Brandon seemed much less tense after this interchange, but Jen felt worried. She had heard from a neighbor on Wednesday about a rumor that Brandon’s principal had been in a very serious car accident on Tuesday night. She didn’t think Brandon had heard her talking with the neighbor or heard her discussing this with her husband, but now she wasn’t sure. Jen wasn’t certain exactly what had happened, and she and Bill had planned to wait until they heard the details before saying anything to Brandon. She knew they would want to tell Brandon before he went back to school and heard about it from someone else. She’d known the principal and his family for many years, and she was secretly hoping that the rumor would turn out to be false. It was so sad to think about what this family would be going through if it were true.

Brandon had left the kitchen and gone up to his room. Jen waited until just before dinner to check in with him again.

“I was wondering,” she said, “what got you thinking about being in a car that got hit by a tree?”

“We saw that blue car with the tree on it,” Brandon said. “Anything else?” Jen asked.

“You and Dad were talking about car accidents, too.”

“When?” she asked.

“Last night when I was trying to sleep,” Brandon told her.

“What did you hear us saying?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You were talking about my teacher and Steve’s mom. You said you didn’t believe it,” Brandon described.

“Dad and I had heard about a car accident, but I wasn’t sure about what happened. I am still not sure.”

“Oh,” said Brandon. He didn’t seem to want to hear more.

Bill stuck his head in. He knew that Jen was finding out more about what Brandon had heard.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, “if you’re worrying about something or you hear something, just tell Mom or me. Don’t worry alone.” Jen and Bill decided to wait to say more until they knew what had actually happened to the principal. They knew they’d need to say something soon or Brandon would hear about it first from someone else. Even if school was closed for another day, he might talk with one of the children in their neighborhood. But, they were relieved that he hadn’t asked anything more. They didn’t want lie to him, but they also didn’t want to share more until they knew whether the principal was still in the hospital, or at home, or, as the neighbor thought, dead.

Sharing Sad News

On Friday, all the parents received a call from their child’s class parent sharing the sad news that the principal had died. They encouraged parents to tell their own children before school re-opened on Tuesday. On Sunday, the district’s school psychologist would be at the elementary school for a meeting with any parents who wanted to talk about how to talk with their children about the death, or to learn about local mental health resources.

Jen and Bill decided to wait to say more until they knew what had actually happened to the principal.

Jen and Bill decided to tell Brandon about the principal’s death later in the day on Friday. They’d read about it in the town newspaper, and explained to Brandon that they had waited to tell him about it until they were really clear about what had happened. Brandon listened intently. He asked a couple of questions. “Was Mr. Leblanc wearing a seatbelt? Was he speeding? Was his dog Felix in the car?” Brandon didn’t know Mr. Leblanc very well, but he loved when the principal brought his Scotty dog, Felix, to school. Brandon was glad that Felix was safe and he imagined that Felix would help Mrs. Leblanc feel less sad.

They talked about attending the memorial service together, though no date had been chosen for it yet. Jen decided to tell Cody separately. They went for a walk outside together and she told him

as they walked. Cody watched his mother's face to see what her reaction was to this news. She was serious, and sad, but she didn't look very, very sad.

He asked if the principal had a little boy. He seemed satisfied when he learned that the principal's children were older—one was already married and another was in college. Cody's attention shifted to things around them.

The boys' parents checked back in with each of them at bedtime. They asked in an open-ended way what each boy was thinking about. Brandon talked about Mr. Leblanc. He remembered a time when he'd talked with Mr. Leblanc after a music assembly. He wondered if the assistant principal would be the new principal.

Cody had lots of things on his mind at bedtime, but none of them related to Mr. Leblanc or the ice storm.

Back to School

Cody came home earlier than Brandon. Jen picked him up from the church preschool. She talked with other parents in the parking lot at pick-up. They were talking about the damage to homes, the two tragic deaths, and catching up with each other about what news they'd heard about other people in their town.

There was a sign on the door that said, "Please do not talk about recent tragedies in the school during drop-off or pick-up. There are 'Talking to Your Child About Troubling Events' handouts in the office. Thank you."

"Please do not talk about recent tragedies in the school during drop-off or pick-up."

Jen appreciated the sign on the door. It was hard to stop talking with the other parents and turn her full attention to Cody, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She picked up the handout and put it in her purse.

She asked Cody in the car on the ride home about his day. He talked about playing with particular friends, but did not mention the ice storm or the deaths. Jen asked him if any one talked about the storm.

Cody said that at circle time he learned that Brianna's barn "got broken" in the storm, and that Aidan's grandpa died. Jen asked how Aidan's grandpa had died, and Cody said, "He was very, very old and he fell down." Jen asked Cody what his friends and teachers said about Aidan's grandpa. "They said it was sad, and sorry, Aidan."

"What did you say, Cody?"

"I said my grandpa died before I was born and grandma lives with Uncle Ed."

“That’s true,” agreed Jen. “I am going to send a card to Aidan’s family from our family. You can draw a picture for Aidan if you want to,” she added.

Jen could see Cody nodding yes in the back seat. She was struck by how differently four-year-olds react to some losses compared to others. Cody had cried and cried when their old cat died a couple of months earlier, but the cat was part of Cody’s daily life and Aidan’s grandfather was someone he didn’t know. She was relieved he wasn’t terribly upset and she knew it was normal, but it seemed strange that a person’s death was less upsetting than a cat’s.

When Brandon got off the bus, Jen and Cody were waiting for him. He asked if he could play with his friend Robert next door. Jen said that he could, but first he needed to come home and change clothes. She asked Brandon about his day and he said it was fine. Jen asked whether Mrs. Johnston and his classmates had talked about the principal or about the ice storm.

“We talked about both,” he said. “We had to draw a picture of the ice storm and write a sentence about the picture. We had to put at least two of our spelling words in our storm story. I used three words; it was easy. I used ‘branch’ and ‘storm’ and ‘slippery.’”

“What did you draw?” asked Jen.

“I drew the bucket truck with the guy cutting off the branches.” Jen had wondered if Brandon would draw the library or the crushed car. She hoped that Brandon’s focus on the positive aspect of the clean-up was a sign that he was not as worried as he had been a few days earlier.

“What about the principal, how were people talking about that?” she asked.

“The vice-principal came in to everybody’s class to talk about him and how we would miss him, and how he liked when we were good cooperators,” Brandon said. “We made cards for his wife, and the vice-principal’s going to bring them to her.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Jen. “What did you write in your card?”

“I made a picture of Felix and I wrote, ‘Dear Mrs. Leblanc, I am sorry Mr. Leblanc died. I liked when Felix came for a visit.’ Can I change now and go to Robert’s?”

At dinner, the storm, the principal, and the grandfather were each mentioned. Neither boy had much to say, but Bill reminded them a lot had happened last week and that if they were thinking about things—or worrying about anything—to talk to him or to Mom.

The Next Big Storm

After the first heavy snowstorm of the winter in January, Brandon was nervous about being in the car. His parents assured him that they were driving slowly and carefully. He asked lots of safety

questions during that storm and the next one. By the end of the winter, there had been so much snow and so many storms, neither Brandon nor Cody talked about the October storm and its damage.

There was a memorial service for Principal Leblanc in the spring. The Greens talked with both boys, and especially with Brandon, explaining why people had memorial services. They described it as a way for lots of friends and family to come together to remember someone special who had died. They told the boys that some people might be crying because they missed Mr. Leblanc, and other people might be smiling because they saw friends or were remembering happy times with Mr. Leblanc. Cody went to a friend's house and Brandon attended the service with his parents. He was quiet during the service and sad on the ride home.

Brandon talked about how it made him sad to see Mr. Leblanc's family crying. He wasn't sure he was glad that he had gone to the service for himself, because it made him sad. He was glad that he went for Mrs. Leblanc, because he thought it made her happy to see all the kids. She had said this when she spoke at the service.

Mr. Leblanc's name came up from time to time. Brandon always reminded his parents that he wanted a dog like Felix. It took a year before the library re-opened. There was talk again about the ice storm, but the Greens could not detect any particular worries in either of their sons.



Talking with Children about a Natural Disaster

- 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

- “There was a big storm that damaged lots of trees and even some buildings. It’s too slippery to go outside today so we’re going to play inside.”
- “We’ve been hearing about trees burning in the forest in the next town over. The firefighters want us to leave our house, to be safe. We’ll drive to Aunt Linda’s house and stay with her until it’s safe to come back. We’ll take care of most of the packing, but you put some things you’d like to play with in your backpack.”

AGES 7–12

- “There was a big ice storm that damaged trees, power lines, some houses, and the town library. There’s no school today or tomorrow and we’ll spend the day at home together.”
- “We’ve been hearing about trees burning in the forest in the next town over. We just learned that to be safe and to let firefighters do their work, we need to leave our house. Some families will go to a shelter but we’ll drive to Aunt Linda’s house and stay with her until it’s safe to come back. We’ll take care of most of the packing, but you put some things you’d like to play with in your backpack. We should be ready to leave in an hour.”

AGES 13–19

- “This ice storm is one of the worst I remember—because of all the leaves still on the trees, a lot of branches and power lines are down. We might not get power back for a couple of days. What are you hearing from your friends?”
- “I know you’ve been aware of the forest fires caused by the drought. We just learned that as a precaution, we need to evacuate from our house. We have about an hour to get packed; can you take care of packing your clothes and laptop, and can you also pack the dog food, bowl, and leash for Max? We’re going to Aunt Linda’s and should plan to be away for as long as a week.”

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?”
 - “I know you were really, really mad at David last week when he broke your Lego building. But feeling mad at someone can’t make bad things happen to him. The wind and the ice on the road made him slip and hurt his arm, not your being mad.”

- “There are lots of snowstorms but usually trees don’t land on libraries.”
- “Usually when we visit Aunt Linda, we come home on Sunday night so you can go to preschool and I can go to work on Monday. On this visit, we are going to stay longer, until we know the forest fire is out.”

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?”
 - “I can understand why you’d be worried that someone might have gotten hurt when the tree fell on that car. But I’m really confident that the people in that house are OK. I’m glad the car was in the driveway and the people were in their house during the storm.”
 - “It’s true that our house was badly damaged by the fire. But that isn’t the same as being homeless. We have a place to sleep where we will be safe, and we have lots of people helping us. We won’t have to sleep outdoors.”

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?”
 - “Are your friends texting or talking about Principal Leblanc? What are you hearing? What I heard is that he was taken to the hospital, but nothing more than that yet. When things are uncertain, it’s easy for rumors to start. I think we’ll hear from the school or superintendent when there’s any new information. Until then, I’m going to keep hoping Principal Leblanc is OK.”
 - “Yes, our house has been badly damaged by the fire, and we are going to figure out where to stay for a while until we can get it fixed. I understand that staying here feels really challenging: you miss your friends and space is really tight. What are your ideas about this? We’ll let you know as we are making decisions.”

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 Dad and I were surprised when we saw the library? We didn’t expect that the tree would make such a big hole in the roof.”
- “You are right, I was crying. I was very sad to hear that a school principal got hurt. But I feel a little better after talking with Mom.”
- “I did yell at you earlier when we were trying to get packed to leave our house. I was frustrated because I was trying to do a big job in a short time, and also worried about the fire. But, I’m not upset with you now, and I feel calmer now that we’re here at Aunt Linda’s house.”

AGES 7–12

- “Could you tell how surprised I was by how much damage the tree did to the library roof? Ice and snowstorms are pretty common, but it’s rare to see this much damage from a fallen tree. I’m really glad no one was hurt.”
- “You heard Mom and me talking about a car accident, and heard us sounding upset. We just got the very surprising and very, very sad news that Principal Leblanc was in that car accident and was injured badly enough that he died.”
- “I had such a hard time believing that our house got so damaged. I have so many good memories of living there, and am feeling really sad, and also worried about all the things we have to do next. But I know that we are a good team and that what’s most important is that all the people in our family are OK.”

AGES 13–19

- “You’re right, Mom and I did sound pretty pessimistic about the library getting repaired any time soon, given the budget cuts the town has made. But it’s too soon to know anything for sure, and I’ll definitely be at town meeting to talk about how important the library is to so many residents here.”
- “I know you heard me on the phone with Nicki and that I sounded upset. I just found out about Principal Leblanc’s death. Even though I knew it was a possibility, I’m so surprised and sad about it. It will take a little while to sink in, and I’m still figuring out what I want to write to Mrs. Leblanc.”
- “I am sorry you saw me so upset. I was just completely shocked that our house got so damaged. I wasn’t letting myself believe it could happen. I have so many good memories

of living there, and am feeling really sad, and also worried about all the things we have to do next. We lost a lot of things, and it will take a while to figure out where we will live next. But I know that we are a good team and that what's most important is that all the people in our family are OK."

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

- "We don't know when David's family's electricity will come back on and when you will be able to have the playdate with him. It might be three or four days, but we hope not. We will let you know as soon as we can schedule the playdate. What would be fun to do now instead?"
- "I am not sure if your music class can still meet at the library. We won't be able to go tomorrow, but I am hoping that by next week we will know where the new meeting place will be."
- "We don't know how many days we will have to stay at Aunt Linda's. The firefighters will let us know when it's safe to come home again. I know it's hard to sleep in a different bed. Is there anything we can do to make it feel more like home to you? Do you want your blanket?"

AGES 7–12

- "Because of the broken power lines in the road, it isn't safe yet to drive around. I know you're really disappointed you can't be with your friends on this day off from school, but we'll check the news later to find out when the repairs have been made."
- "We do know that Principal Leblanc has died, but I don't think the school knows yet who the new principal will be. It might take a couple of weeks for that decision to be made."
- "Even though we don't know when we will have our own house again, we are doing our best to find a place to live in our town so that you can get to school and see friends easily."

AGES 13–19

- "Given the road conditions, I think it might not make sense for you to take your driving test this weekend, after all. We can wait and see how things look, but we should decide by Friday so we can cancel if we need to."

- “The memorial service for Principal Leblanc is going to be some time in the next few weeks. Kids who knew him are being invited to make a video that will be shown. Do you want to help?”
- “We are still trying to firm up housing options for the next few months. We are pretty sure we can find something in our town, but not sure whether it will be very close to your school. We are expecting calls back about a couple of places in the next few days and will let you know what we hear.”

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!”

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.”
- “What were the best parts and the worst parts of all of this for you?”

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 others?”
- “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 if’s’ 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 is 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

- "Even though there is still a lot to clean up, it's good to see so many neighbors helping neighbors with shoveling and clearing branches. What can we do to help David's family? Do you want to make some cookies for them to eat when they are done working outside?"
- "I feel so grateful for the firefighters who worked so hard to put the fire out! They are really brave people."

AGES 7–12

- "After a bad storm like this, it's really important that neighbors help each other. Dad and I are part of a team that's going to help some of the older people in town who need a hand cleaning up. Do you want to come with us for part of the afternoon?"
- "After that crazy hour of packing to evacuate, I think having a list of what to remember, and an emergency kit would be smart. Do you want to help me put it together?"

AGES 13–19

- "Just seeing the destruction from a storm like this makes you understand better how hard it must be in other parts of the country, or the world, where the infrastructure to support families isn't up to the task or doesn't exist at all, or for families who don't have the resources that we do. I wonder about doing a fundraiser with your friends for the Red Cross—what do you think?"
- "The badly organized response to this disaster made me angry, too. The same problems seem to happen again and again. Our community needs to find more ways to advocate for itself. I'm going to a meeting of community leaders tomorrow; do you want to come, too?"

About the Authors

Cindy Moore, PhD is the Associate Director of the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting at a Challenging Time (PACT) Program at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, which provides parent guidance to support the emotional health and well-being of children when a parent is seriously ill. She speaks nationally about the PACT parent guidance model to physicians, nurses, mental health clinicians and educators. Dr. Moore graduated from Cornell University and the University of Virginia, and is currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, and an Associate Psychologist in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at MGH, where she has a particular interest in providing care to bereaved adults and children.

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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
Developing Resilience through Engagement, Awareness and Media

