

Community Crises and Disasters

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



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Talking with Children of All Ages

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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Design: David Gerratt (*NonprofitDesign.com*)

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Illustration: John Berry

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Contents

- iii **Acknowledgments**
- v **Preface**
- 1 **PART ONE**
 - Facing Challenges Together
- 3 **From Crisis Comes Opportunity**
 - 3 Who We Are: The PACT Team
 - 4 Why We Emphasize Communication
 - 5 How This Guide Is Organized
 - 6 What We Learned from Parents: Post-Marathon Challenges
- 9 **Trauma and Resilience**
 - 9 Stress vs. Trauma
 - 10 Same Stressor, Different Reactions
 - 12 Loss and Grief
 - 12 Supporting Resilience
 - 13 Communities with Chronic Stressors
- 14 **Coping at Different Ages**
 - 15 Infants and Toddlers (0–3 years)
 - 15 Preschoolers (3–6 years)
 - 17 Elementary School-Age Children (7–12 years)
 - 18 Teenagers (13–19 years)
- 20 **Caring for Yourself and Your Family**
 - 21 Staying Calm and Connected
 - 21 Self-Care Is Not Selfish
 - 22 Seeking Professional Help
 - 22 When to Seek Help
 - 22 Where to Find Help
 - 23 How Does Therapy Help?
 - 24 Talking about Therapy with Your Child
 - 24 Accessing School Support
 - 25 Communicating with Schools: A Two-Way Street

26	Making Choices about Media Use
27	Be a Savvy Media Consumer
28	Be a Good Role Model
28	How Much Is Too Much?
28	Preschoolers (3-6)
29	Elementary School Age (7-12)
29	Teenagers (13-19)
29	Managing Media
29	Talking about Media Use: Sample Questions to Try
31	Parenting Through Crisis: A Quick Guide
35	PART TWO
	Talking Through a Crisis: Finding Words That Work
37	Talking with Children after a Crisis or Disaster
37	Getting Started
39	Following Up
40	Conversation Tips: Ages 3-6
40	Conversation Tips: Ages 7-12
41	Conversation Tips: Ages 13-19
43	Stories of Families Facing Crisis
44	Living “Boston Strong”: A Story about Violence in the Community
55	Talking with Children about Violence in the Community
63	Weathering the Storm: A Story about a Natural Disaster
71	Talking with Children about a Natural Disaster
80	Navigating a Loss: A Story about an Accident in the Community
88	Talking with Children about an Accident in the Community
97	Resources
101	APPENDIX
101	Patriots’ Day Project Resources
102	Tips for Talking with Children about the Marathon Anniversary
104	Pre-Marathon Anniversary Blog Posts
116	ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Paula K. Rauch, MD

Cynthia Moore, PhD

Kristin Russell, MD

Sarah Shea, PhD

Mary Susan Convery, LICSW

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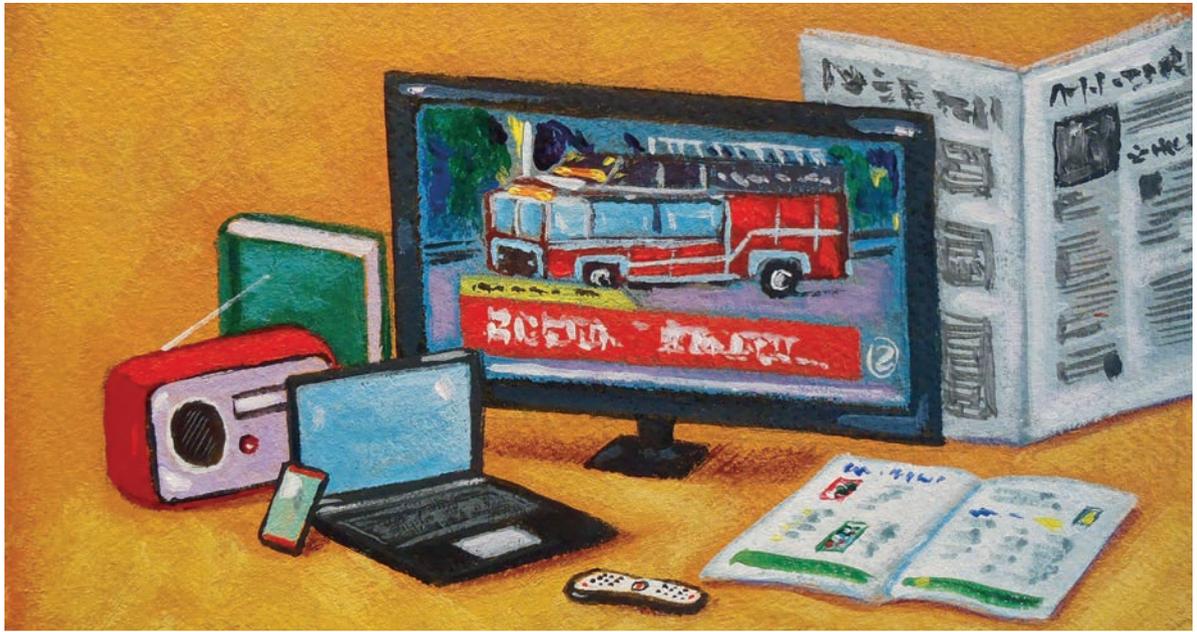


Preface

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.



Making Choices about Media Use

Especially during a community crisis, disaster, or tragedy, children of all ages are exposed to a wide range of messages and images through traditional and non-traditional media. Older children increasingly get their information and communicate with peers through texts, posts, and Tweets. Parents need to be proactive in supervising a child's or teen's exposure to media and use of technology, and fully engaged to help interpret the incoming information. During stressful times, children and teens may seek immediate answers to their questions from the Internet or peers rather than from parents, so it's easy for parents to be unaware of a child's questions—and the answers she may be finding. A search engine never says, "Ask an adult you trust." Too often, virtual "conversations" can be emotionally intense, upsetting, or misleading, and may go on for some time without a distressed child or teen seeking parental support. Whether by limiting access to too much TV coverage, intervening in troubling exchanges, unplugging during mealtimes to enable family conversation, or making sure phones are off during sleeping hours, parents need to be active in gauging, and perhaps limiting, a child's or teen's media exposure and/or technology use.

Technology—particularly cell and smart phones—is part of family safety planning, too. Parents, teens, and even younger children rely on phones to connect during emergencies. The expectation that family members can always reach each other can inadvertently lead to inadequate planning. In a crisis, a phone may be disabled, lost, or uncharged. It is important to know where your child will be, have a backup plan for connecting if phones do not work, and determine a meeting place if you are separated.

Be a Savvy Media Consumer

Help your children put what they learn from a range of media sources into perspective by sharing these facts:

- news shows are part of the TV business, which makes its money on numbers of viewers and ad sales; the goal is to keep you watching; increasing the hype or the “stay tuned” message is intended to keep you from turning off the show
- crises, disasters, and tragedies are “news” because they’re rare: they happen less often than all the positive, ordinary, and usual events; by showing so much of what is negative, sensational, and upsetting, and so little of the “good,” media can make it seem as if terrible things are far more common than they really are
- TV can make people feel anxious; less TV is often a good choice
- information on websites is often inaccurate: some sites are far less trustworthy than others, so encourage children to consult adults for help with this
- when surfing online, unwanted and disturbing images can easily pop up; suggest that children seek any online information about troubling events with a parent

Middle school and high school–age children may also be able to understand that:

- different TV stations represent different political ideologies
- arguments about current events, including disasters and crises, are often one-sided
- it is hard to tell a complicated story in a short sound bite
- anything can be found on the web, but teens may not be ready to absorb it alone; encourage them to search with a parent or trusted adult
- making sense, together, of what has happened goes way beyond acquiring information

Be a Good Role Model

Adults, like children, often have trouble disengaging from the TV or Internet. This is especially true when a crisis is unfolding. It can feel critically important to stay on top of new information, and parents may worry that turning off the computer or TV will mean missing important updates. It is worth thinking carefully about the costs and benefits of spending many hours following news coverage, both for your children's benefit and your own.

- recognize that it's hard to turn off the TV, even when you know you should
- be aware of what kind and how much media exposure is best for your own emotional well-being
- be prepared to talk with your child about other ways to get information and news (for example, print media, Internet, radio), and where you get your most helpful information
- disasters are likely to be discussed in the news many times, including at times related to anniversaries, trials, repair of destruction, etc.; be aware that this coverage may re-activate worries in children or adults
- bear in mind that talking with your child involves more listening than talking
- seek input from other parents you trust and admire, especially those who are most tuned into media and technology

How Much Is Too Much?

Under each age category, we offer suggestions for regulating media/technology exposure:

PRESCHOOLERS (3–6)

- do not show preschoolers adult news coverage
- check in regularly to learn what a preschooler may have seen or heard
- it's preferable that a parent learn about a troubling event and then convey the information in an age-appropriate way to a young child
- children will not understand how media footage and commentary relate to their personal safety
- preschoolers are too young to assess the when, where, or how of a crisis on TV, or to differentiate fact from fiction

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE (7–12)

- news coverage should be watched or listened to with a parent present
- ask questions to see if the content or images are troubling
- watch for emerging anxiety or specific worries following media exposure
- make the use of technology contingent on turning it off after a designated amount of time
- no technology for one hour before bedtime and during the night (this is important for sleep health)
- visit websites together

TEENAGERS (13–19)

- technology should be turned off during meals (parents should follow the same rules)
- turn off all sounds associated with incoming messages at night (if a teen is not able to unplug for the night, technology needs to be removed from the bedroom)
- spot check texts and posts with a teen to get a sense of what those conversations are like; if posts or texts are upsetting, talk together about limiting, or taking a break from, distressing communication (e.g., Facebook, texts with a particular peer, etc.)
- technology should not interfere with meals, schoolwork, or outside activities

Managing Media

So that you can better manage children’s media use, rather than having media “manage” your children (or you), we offer some questions to start conversations that can go beyond, “Haven’t you spent enough time on the computer?” Learning from children about how they find information of interest, evaluate the quality of the information and its source, and react to the different modes through which information is conveyed (images, text, audio), may provide a window into their experience of a world that can be both stimulating and challenging to navigate.

TALKING ABOUT MEDIA USE: SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO TRY

- In what ways are you getting information? Which are the fastest? Most accurate? Least useful? Scariest?
- Who is in the conversation? Who maybe should be, but isn’t?
- Is the conversation “smart,” or is “dumb” stuff being texted, Tweeted, posted, etc.? (Perhaps ask if you can see the back and forth of your child’s exchanges)

- What is an example of something smart that got you thinking?
- What is an example of something stupid?
- What mean or threatening things have you seen online?
- Have you seen images you wish you had not seen? What are the worst pictures or videos you've seen?
- Do you feel able to turn off the TV, stay off Facebook, or take a break from texting?
- Do you trust what you are seeing (on TV, the Internet, Facebook, etc.)? How do you decide whether you trust a source?
- What have you noticed about TV coverage? (For example, have you noticed that newscasters repeat the same information and images, that they have excitement in their voices, etc.?)

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.

Paula K. Rauch, MD is the founding director of the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) Program at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center and the Family Team Program Director for the Home Base Program (a partnership between the Red Sox Foundation and the Massachusetts General Hospital) serving post 9/11 veterans and their families.

Dr. Rauch graduated from Amherst College and the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and completed her psychiatry residency at Massachusetts General Hospital. She is board certified in adult, child and adolescent psychiatry and is an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She is an advisor to the Public Broadcasting Station “Arthur” cartoon and Family Health Website and co author of “Raising an Emotionally Healthy Child When a Parent is Sick.” Dr. Rauch serves on the Science Advisory Board for the Military Child Education Coalition and on the Amherst College Board of Trustees.

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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.

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The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds
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