

# 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](http://www.mghpact.org).

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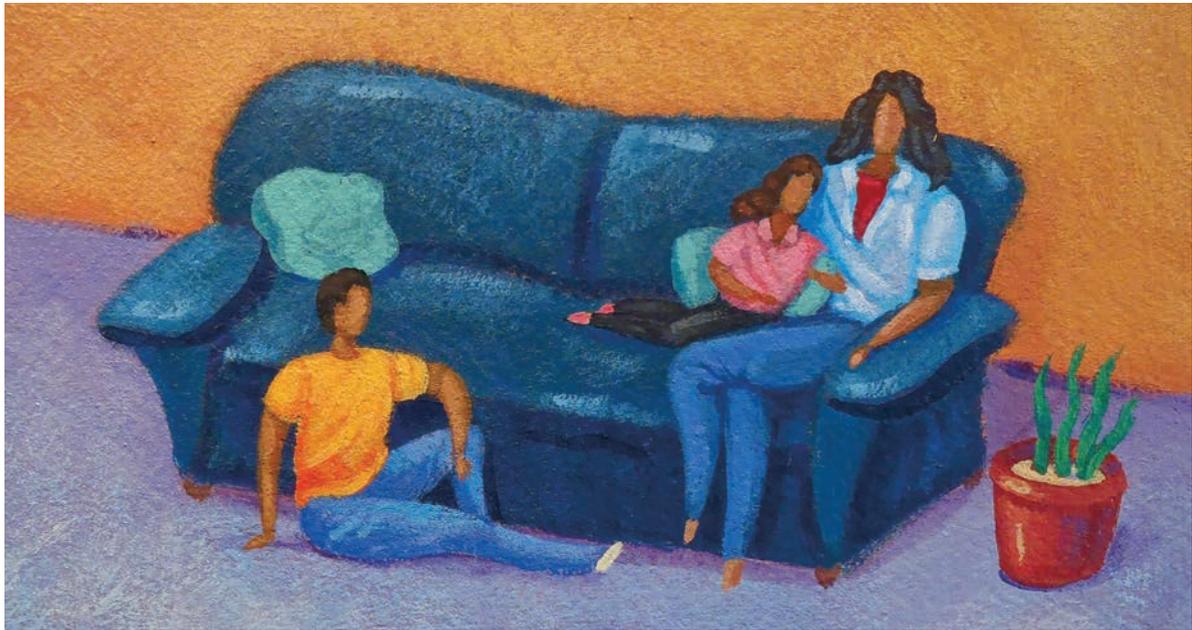
# Preface

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.





# Talking with Children after a Crisis or Disaster

The goals for parents in talking with children after a crisis are, essentially, these: be calm; be honest; be available; be reassuring. However, as most parents know, the devil is often in the details—just how honest? And how reassuring, given the very real dangers in our world? Below is a guide offering general questions and comments that can be adapted to a specific crisis, organized by initial conversations (during or soon after the events), and follow-up through the aftermath, over days and weeks.

## Getting Started

1. As the airlines advise, “put on your own oxygen mask first.” If at all possible, calm yourself before talking to your child; take some slow, deep breaths, and take a minute to think about what you will say. Children will watch adults’ emotional reactions to determine their own safety, so do your best to speak calmly, even when you may not feel that way.

2. When it's clear that you and your child are physically safe, provide a simple explanation of what is happening.
  - Avoid words that emphasize the shocking aspects of the event, such as “horrifying,” “terrifying,” “devastating,” “bloody,” or “blown to bits”
  - Use lower-emotion descriptive words, such as “scary,” “upsetting,” “injured,” or “hurt by an explosion”
3. Or, if your child already knows what happened, find out about her understanding of the events, and address any worries or misunderstandings.
  - “What did you see and hear?”
  - “What else do you know about this?”
  - “What are you wondering or worrying about?”
  - “If \_\_\_\_\_ (a familiar adult) asked about what happened, what would you tell her?”
  - “If \_\_\_\_\_ (a peer or sibling) asked you what happened, what would you tell him?”
  - “What is scary or confusing about this?”
4. If your child has witnessed your distress, acknowledge your feelings and share why you were feeling that way.
5. Often, you will not have all the facts, so let your child know that more information will be available later. Try to describe what is known and what is not yet known, focusing on the details that will matter most to your individual child.
6. Let your child know you will follow up with him in coming days and that you want him to come to you with any and all questions or concerns.
  - “If you learn more, or hear more, or have questions, will you let me know?”
  - “Please don't ever worry alone.”

## Following Up

1. Let children know that it's normal to have a lot of different feelings and reactions after a frightening event. For example, it is normal to:
  - feel more worried for a few days or weeks
  - want to do comforting things, like watch a movie at home with your friends or family
  - want either to stay away from where the event occurred, or to visit that place
  - want to learn more about the details of what happened, or not want to talk about it or learn more details
2. Ask children to talk about how they, and people they know, are coping in the aftermath. Try to get children thinking with you about helpful and less helpful ways to manage during difficult times. Learning healthy ways to cope with stress is an ongoing and important life skill for everyone.
  - “Who do you think is most upset about this? Why?”
  - “Are you worried about anyone you know and how he or she is coping?”
  - “What kinds of things help you feel better when you're upset?” (IDEAS: talk with a parent, teacher, or friend; listen to music; read a book; play outside; turn off the TV; play a game; make something; eat nutritious food; get enough sleep)
  - “What kinds of things make you feel a little better right away when you're upset, but could make bigger problems for you later?” (IDEAS: worry alone; not tell anyone; break something; yell at people; punch the wall; refuse to go to school; stop going on playdates or to birthday parties; stop doing homework; stay up all night; drink alcohol; smoke; take someone else's medicine; hurt yourself)
3. Think together with your child about a plan to cope with and actively manage anxiety. (“How can you manage your worried thoughts?”) A plan could include:
  - a brief strategy to manage physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., taking deep breaths)
  - a helpful self-statement (e.g., “Maybe when you feel worried, you can remember to say to yourself that the bad guys were caught and can't hurt anyone else.”)
  - a plan for facing fears (e.g., “I can be brave and go upstairs by myself. I've done it before.”)

4. As difficult as this may be, do not allow your child to avoid for long those situations that trigger anxiety. Even though avoiding certain situations or “triggers” to anxiety may help children feel calmer in the short run, in the long run, avoidance actually increases anxiety. Instead, support your child to face fears gradually. Consider meeting with a mental health professional who uses Cognitive Behavior Therapy to treat anxiety in children.

### **Conversation Tips: Ages 3–6**

- Encourage children to ask you questions and to share what they think are the answers.
- Provide enough detail so that your child can fit together all the pieces of the story he is seeing or hearing, or will likely learn about in the near future. It is much more difficult to hide information from children than parents often assume. If you have any doubts, ask your child if he has heard or seen anything that is confusing. Also, remember that preschool children are usually less emotionally affected by events that do not directly impact their day-to-day functioning than are older children and adults. So letting a young child know about an event that is distressing to you, but distant, helps your child to avoid picking up on parts of the story and assuming he is in any danger.
- Suggest a way to communicate fears that does not involve talking.
  - “If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand; then I’ll know you need to tell me something or just need a hug.”
- Recognize that young children might form connections between events that don’t make sense to older children or adults, and look for ways to reassure your child that she is safe. For example, a child might believe that if it rains even a little bit, it means that a hurricane is happening again.
  - “This is a thunderstorm, not a hurricane. A thunderstorm is much smaller than a hurricane and not as windy, and won’t damage houses like the hurricane did.”

### **Conversation Tips: Ages 7–12**

- When your child seems upset or anxious, try to identify any specific worries he can put into words.
  - “Can you tell me what you’re thinking about? Is there something you’re imagining might happen?”
- In thinking about how much detail to share, consider what children could overhear from older siblings, peers, or older children at school, or via TV or the Internet. Many children feel better learning about a crisis at home, rather than hearing about it for the first time from peers.

- Remember that children can have a hard time figuring out which situations are safe and which are dangerous. Try to listen for concerns about safety that may underlie reluctance to engage in usual activities, and find ways to talk about those worries.
  - Rather than say, “Look, we paid for this activity so you’re going,” or, “You are part of a team so you have to show up,” try, “I feel very certain that this is a safe thing for you to do. If I were worried about your safety, I would not let you do it. Remember how I made you wear that ski helmet you hated? Let’s see what might help you feel more comfortable when you go.”
- Convey confidence without promising that nothing bad can ever happen. Try describing future bad events not as impossible, but as really, really unlikely, if this is true.
  - “You’re right, another tornado coming to this town isn’t impossible, but it is really, really unlikely. Just like all the Red Sox players hitting home runs all season isn’t actually impossible . . . but it’s not likely, is it?”
- Sometimes it is easier to be patient with an anxious child than with an irritable one. If you find yourself getting frustrated with a cranky child, try to remember that she is expressing her distress as best she can and may need your help to settle herself down.
  - Rather than, “What is wrong with you? Can’t you see how worried your sister is? Don’t make it worse,” try, “I see that you’re having trouble with this problem,” or “It seems like you’re getting kind of irritated,” and then offer a couple choices of things the child can do instead.
- Even when you can’t assure your child that things are 100% safe, give concrete examples of how caregivers, teachers, police, doctors, and others are working together to make things safe for him and the community.
  - “Your teacher called all the kids’ parents last night to make sure you all were doing okay after the police presentation at school yesterday.”
  - “Law enforcement people at every level—town, state, and national—are working together to find the people who did this. And people who were near the explosions are sending in pictures and videos to help police figure it out.”

### Conversation Tips: Ages 13–19

- It is common after a crisis for parents to want to reinforce to teenagers the importance of their making responsible decisions to keep themselves safe. Think carefully about the message you want your teen to hear, as you talk to him about the world we live in, and try to balance the warning to be cautious with some optimism.

- Rather than, “The world is filled with crazy people, and you’re never safe. You really have to be vigilant at all times,” consider, “Yes, the world can be a dangerous place, unfortunately. But, even though there are definitely bad people, I believe there are many more good people. And there are ways you can reduce your risk of getting hurt.”
- Talk with teenagers about their role in making the world a better, safer place, in big ways and small.
  - “There are lots of helpers in our world—just look at all the people who jumped in. It’s important to help in situations like this.”

## About the Authors

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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.

MARJORIE E. KORFF PACT PROGRAM

# PACT

Parenting At a Challenging Time

This handbook was produced with continuing support from  
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The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds  
Developing Resilience through Engagement, Awareness and Media

