

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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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.



Navigating a Loss

A Story about an Accident in the Community

The Hollingston High School basketball team was playing its final game of the season on Friday night. Winning this game meant they'd play for the division championship. Jack, 18, drove Jorge, 17, and Andre, 17, to watch the away game together against their rival school. They weren't big basketball fans, but they were on the track team together and were used to competing against this rival. And as seniors, this would be their last chance to see some good friends on the basketball team play. They met up with some other kids from their high school at the game. They sat with a few other seniors, with sophomores Cassie and Emilia, and with Emilia's older brother, Tomás, who had graduated from Hollingston High School the previous year.

Jack was bored after half time, but Jorge and Andre wanted to stay until the game was over. They reminded Jack that he liked having a crowd at a track meet. The score was not even close—with 10 minutes to play, they were behind by more than 20 points. Jack insisted they leave early, and he was driving.

Cassie lived near Andre and asked if she could get a ride home with the older boys. Emilia knew that secretly Cassie had a crush on Jorge, which was likely why she wanted to ride with them. Emilia's feelings were a little hurt that Cassie wanted to leave early with the guys. Emilia was not really interested in dating anyone, but Cassie was eager to have her first real boyfriend. She'd let Emilia know that she'd love to date a senior and get invited to senior prom. Emilia was pretty sure that Jorge was not interested in Cassie, but it didn't seem like being a good friend to say so. Cassie's interest in the guys was a new challenge for their friendship. For the first time, it seemed they weren't in synch.

Jack said Cassie was welcome to ride home with them. Tomás was pleased that he wouldn't have to drive out of his way to take her home. So he said, "great idea." Emilia felt upset, but she smiled and said something positive about the plan. The four of them left the gym and headed for Jack's car to drive home. Emilia and Tomás stayed until the end of the game and watched Hollingston lose.

No one knows exactly what happened after that, but on the drive home in the dark, Jack lost control of the car and crashed into a tree. Cassie was in the front seat next to Jack and died on impact. Jack, in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) briefly with a serious head injury, died early Saturday morning. Jorge was not wearing a seatbelt, was thrown from the car, and died. Andre, in the back seat with a seatbelt on, sustained multiple fractures and would face months of rehab, but was expected to survive.

In the very early hours of Saturday morning, the phone rang and Emilia heard her mother's voice as she answered the phone. She could tell that something terrible had happened, even though she couldn't hear what her mother was saying. Mrs. Pato—Mariana—learned later that Emilia thought her grandfather must have died. In her head, Emilia would replay hearing the phone ring and hearing her mother's voice over and over again, for months. Every time the phone rang in the evening or at night, she'd startle and her insides would flip as if it were happening again.

Emilia heard her mother's voice as she answered the phone and could tell that something terrible had happened.

Mariana was stunned. Cassie's aunt had called to tell her that Cassie had been in a car accident and had died. Mariana thought that Tomás had taken Cassie home. She knew they'd gone to the game together. She was confused about what had happened, but didn't want to ask too many questions. Cassie's aunt said that Cassie's mother, Ilene, had asked her to make some calls. Mariana found it hard to speak, and was shaking. Cassie's aunt shared a few details. She was with the family at their house, and no, there was nothing anyone could do for them right now, thanks.

Mariana, teary and pale, went into her daughter's room and sat down on her bed. She told Emilia she had very bad news. There had been a car accident involving Cassie, and she and Jorge had died, and Jack and Andre were both in the hospital. Emilia said, "No. No. It isn't

true!” Mariana knew the way Emilia looked when she was really upset. She looked like she might vomit.

Almost immediately, Emilia began to feel that she was to blame. She felt like she’d done something really wrong, and was certain that her mother and Cassie’s mother must be really angry at her. She should not have let Cassie go home with Jack. “Cassie wanted to go home with them. She had a ridiculous crush on Jorge, and Jack was taking Andre home. He lives right next door to her,” Emilia explained and then she started to cry. “It’s my fault, I should have made her come with Tomás and me,” she whispered.

“No, it’s not your fault,” said her mother. Mariana hugged her and they both cried.

It turned out that Cassie had texted her parents from the car to say that she was getting a ride from Jack because he was taking Andre home, too. Emilia felt relieved that Cassie had told her parents about the ride; it felt less like her fault, or maybe just easier that she wouldn’t have to explain this to Cassie’s parents herself. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to see Cassie’s mom again. She asked her mother how Cassie’s mother was doing. Mariana said, “I don’t know; in shock, heartsick, I am sure.” It was Cassie’s aunt who had called, not her mother, but Cassie’s mom had wanted Emilia and her mother to know right away. Mariana told Emilia she thought this was because she knew what good friends they were.

She stayed with Emilia for more than an hour. Emilia didn’t want to have tea, and didn’t want to talk much. She eventually said that she wanted to be alone to think. Mariana was worried, but she didn’t know what else to do. So she went back to her own bedroom. Emilia lay awake most of the rest of the night. She told her mother that she woke up around 7am, so she must have fallen asleep for a little while. Her first thought was that the accident had been a nightmare, but in an instant she realized that it had really happened, and her mix of nausea and distress returned. In her room, Mariana was feeling similarly. Her thoughts went to Ilene and Cassie and Cassie’s younger brother, Doug. It was too awful for words. She was also very worried about Emilia. Cassie had been her best friend since elementary school. She wondered how her daughter would cope with such a big and totally unanticipated loss.

Emilia spent the day in her pajamas. Mariana asked her what she wanted to do. Emilia said, “There is nothing I can do.”

She insisted that Emilia drink some juice and have toast, and later tea and toast again, otherwise she would not have eaten anything all day.

The News Spreads

Mariana got calls from other parents. She wasn’t close to the parents of the boys, but most of Cassie’s friends were Emilia’s friends, too. Mariana appreciated talking with the other parents.

She took the calls behind the closed door in her room, because Emilia told her she didn't want to hear the conversations. She knew that Emilia was getting calls and texts on her phone, but wasn't responding to any of them. "I can't talk to anybody," she'd said. "It's too hard and I don't want to. What is there to say?"

The police report said that speed and alcohol had been factors in the crash. No other details of the accident were reported in the media. News of the tragic accident spread through the community quickly. Grief counselors were going to be at the high school over the weekend and again on Monday for any student who wanted to talk with them.

Mariana learned that Jack had a reputation for being a partier. He'd gotten into trouble for drinking at a friend's house party over the summer. The friend's parents were away and the police were called about the noise. Supposedly, it wasn't the only time that he'd been drunk at a party, but so many high school students had been drunk at a party at some time during high school that Jack was hardly unusual. In the aftermath of the accident, there was lots of talk about his drinking, but no one knew of a time when he'd been in any kind of car accident. Other parents wondered about how much he had been drinking the night of the accident. He was sometimes a clown, so some of their children thought he was likely fooling around and somehow lost control of the car. There were multiple theories and plenty of opinions, but none of that diminished the massive tragedy.

Mariana wondered if Emilia was in shock. She was so quiet most of the day.

Saturday afternoon, many classmates went to the crash site and created a makeshift memorial, leaving flowers and notes. Friends hugged each other and cried. The local TV stations sent reporters who interviewed teens at the site. They talked about what good kids Jorge, Cassie, and Jack were. They talked about how they hoped that Andre would pull through and how hard this would all be for him. The track coach was interviewed, and talked about what wonderful young people they were.

Members of the families of the teens in the car were on TV asking for their privacy during this devastating time. The Sunday paper had a photo of Cassie's front door with a note saying, "Please respect our privacy. Thank you for your prayers."

Mariana wondered if Emilia was in shock. She was so quiet most of the day. Finally, she started to talk on Saturday evening. She said that Cassie was her best friend since the third grade, and she should not have let her leave with those other kids instead of coming home with her and Tomás. Mariana and Emilia talked about Tomás. They both knew that he was feeling guilty, too. He'd been pleased that Cassie had decided to go with Jack so that he didn't need to drive the extra mile to take her home. He had said, "Great idea." He told his mother, Saturday morning, that he felt like if he'd been more generous, he could have saved her life. Mariana talked about how it was normal to feel like you could have done something differently, but that he had no way of knowing

what would happen. She told Emilia about this conversation with Tomás, and Emilia automatically said, “It wasn’t Tomás’s fault. Cassie wanted to go with them.”

“It wasn’t your fault, either,” her mother said quietly.

Emilia told her mother and Tomás that she was sure that Jack wasn’t drunk when he left the gym. She wished she knew what had happened. It felt like if she knew what happened, it would be easier.

Mariana listened. Emilia was repeating the same questions over and over again. “Was there already alcohol in the car, or had they stopped on the way home and been drinking somewhere?” Emilia insisted, “It wasn’t like Cassie to ride with someone who was drunk.” It didn’t make sense. “Maybe something got decided after they left and she felt like she didn’t have a choice.” Mariana agreed that it felt really hard not to know. Emilia felt that if she could figure it out, she could undo it and Cassie would be safe. She knew this didn’t make sense, but Cassie being dead seemed impossible. Mariana was glad that Emilia was sharing her thoughts, but it was hard to do more than just listen. She reminded Emilia that she had been such a good friend to Cassie.

Emilia went online to see what friends were saying about Cassie and about the accident. She told Mariana that she was angry. She saw all the posts on Facebook by classmates who were not even friends of Cassie’s and they were being dramatic about their grief. She was mad that more attention seemed to be focused on Jack and Jorge, instead of Cassie. Her friend Matt, who was also a good friend of Cassie’s, was the one person who understood how she was feeling. “At least he gets it,” she told her mother. Matt told her that another one of their friends was feeling really guilty about something he’d said to Jorge more than a year earlier.

Emilia focused her anger on Jack, blaming him for what had happened, though it was hard to say anything critical about someone who had just died. She felt angry at anyone who was saying nice things about him. Mariana told Emilia that her anger was understandable. She felt angry at Jack too, but also, really sad for everyone in the car and everyone who loved them. Mariana wondered if Emilia would be upset if she didn’t side with her completely against Jack, but it seemed that Emilia felt a little better knowing that she could express her anger with her mother and have it validated, even while her mom cared about everyone.

Mariana was trying to be steady, calm, and as much her usual self as she could be. She’d reached out to a good friend of hers, who had been through a similar experience in her teens. That friend had told her that this stability was what she’d appreciated most from her mother 30 years ago. She’d told Mariana that she had needed to feel her feelings and her misery intensely, but needed her mother to be calm and loving *and* to keep her sort of on track. She’d wanted to stop going to school that year and her mother had told her this wasn’t a choice. Looking back, she really appreciated that. Her mother had also encouraged her to talk with a counselor, which had helped.

It wasn't only Emilia's distress and Tomás's guilt that were difficult. Mariana was, herself, devastated by Cassie's death. Cassie was practically a family member after all these years, and she and Cassie's mother had become good friends. She thought of all the times they'd helped each other out during difficult times; as a single parent, Mariana had come to rely on Ilene as her backup. Mariana could not even imagine the pain Ilene must be experiencing. Though she struggled for words, Mariana had called and left a voicemail for her—just to connect and so Ilene would know she was “there” for her in this awful tragedy. Mariana kept thinking about what it would be like if it had been Emilia in that car. She was scared that Emilia would not be able to cope with this event, in part because she felt so overwhelmed herself.

Sunday

Emilia continued talking with her mother. She shared what she was seeing on Facebook and in texts she received. Emilia was observing the other teens' reactions, but she wasn't posting anything herself. She did text with her friend Matthew. “I'm not ready to do more,” she told her mother. Emilia was as honest as she could be about how she was feeling. She knew everyone was upset.

Mariana tried to say less and listen more, but it was hard to see Emilia so upset and to feel so helpless.

Emilia told her mother that she couldn't imagine going back to school without Cassie. She was dreading sitting in Spanish class with Cassie's empty seat next to her. Mariana wanted to lessen Emilia's distress. “Time heals all wounds,” she said.

“Cassie loved you. She wouldn't want you to be unhappy.” But the more her mother tried to be comforting, the more it felt to Emilia like she didn't get it. Mariana could tell that her “comforting” comments were making things worse, but she couldn't think of anything else to say. She tried to say less and listen more, but it was hard to see Emilia so upset and to be so helpless.

“You have no clue what this is like for me!” Emilia finally told her.

Mariana said, “You're right. I have no words for this. I am really just so sad, too.” Admitting her helplessness seemed to help Emilia feel less angry and less alone. “It is so hard to believe,” Mariana said, and Emilia nodded.

Emilia watched the coverage of the accident on TV with her mother. She didn't want to go to the site of the accident. She didn't want to focus on how Cassie died, and wished she'd never seen photos of the car. She hoped it happened so fast that Cassie didn't know what was happening. It felt better to have spent the weekend at home with just her mother and Tomás. She spoke with a couple of friends and texted with a couple more on Sunday night.

On Sunday evening, she and her mother left flowers at Cassie's house. The sign was on the door asking for privacy, so they didn't ring the doorbell.

Back to School

Monday morning, every homeroom class talked about the accident. Emilia's homeroom teacher was a physics teacher. He told the class about the counselors, and that he and every teacher were available for students to talk with at any time. There was a moment of silence. Then, he tried to get a conversation going about the accident. It felt to Emilia like most of the class was sad, but no one else seemed devastated like she was. It felt lonely and she felt separated from the others. One classmate talked about how you never expect something like this to happen to kids you know. Others talked about experiences with accidents and deaths. One classmate talked about drinking and driving, driving fast, and texting while driving, and wondered why kids did it when everyone knows they're so dangerous. Emilia listened silently. She felt angry at a girl who talked about how great it was to go to crash site and cry together. The same girl talked about how many TV stations there were at the site interviewing people. Finally, the bell rang and everyone headed to first class.

Emilia was relieved to get out of homeroom and get to math class. It was easier having something else to focus on. Spanish class was hard, as she'd expected. She felt teary through the class. She was glad that Señora Ramos had acknowledged how sad she was about Cassie, and then continued on with the class.

The library had been turned into a drop-in space with grief counselors there. Friends, classmates, and teammates of Jack, Jorge, Andre, and Cassie stopped in to the library all day. Some spent most of the day "hanging out" together and talking about their classmates. Some talked about being angry that they had driven recklessly. Counselors checked in with a few students who didn't come to talk. Jack's ex-girlfriend, Andre's best friend, and Emilia each received this extra outreach, as did a brother and sister whose mother had died in a car accident a few years earlier.

Emilia wasn't ready to talk to anyone that week. She did end up talking with the art teacher, whom she really liked, the following week. She came in to finish a collage that she'd been working on and they got talking. The art teacher listened more than she talked, and eventually shared a story about a friend of hers who'd died in a car accident when she was a teenager. The art teacher asked her, as others had, was she sleeping and eating, was she having nightmares, did she feel like she wanted to hurt herself. Emilia had had a couple of bad dreams, but actually waking up was the hardest. There would be an instant before she remembered that Cassie was dead, and then the sinking feeling would return. She didn't feel like she wanted to hurt herself and she was eating and sleeping. She desperately wanted to undo that night, but no matter how much she tried to replay what she could have said or done, she couldn't change it.

Mariana, Tomás, and Emilia attended Cassie's funeral. It was incredibly sad. Cassie's parents hugged Emilia, and Emilia cried. Later she told her mother that this helped her feel like they were not angry at her. She and Cassie's little brother hugged awkwardly. Emilia made a promise to herself that she'd try to be a second big sister to Doug. It felt like something Cassie would really appreciate, and the idea of being with someone who loved her was comforting to think about.

She didn't attend Jack's or Jorge's funerals. She was glad that her mother let her choose.

Tomás went to talk with a counselor at his college mental health center. He found it helpful to be able to talk about his guilty feelings. Once he started talking with the counselor, he found that he had other things he wanted to talk about, too.

Emilia wasn't ready to talk with a counselor, and was adamant that it wouldn't be helpful for her. She offered to take Doug out for pizza one weekend, and then bowling a couple of weeks later. They started to get into a routine of hanging out every two weeks. Mariana knew from Cassie's parents that this was a real positive for Doug. They knew that their own grief made it hard for Doug, who was suddenly an only child. Emilia made him feel special and feel connected to his sister. They always talked about her when they were together, about what she loved and what she didn't. There were lots of small things they each knew about her and could share together. Emilia had always been the little sister. She found she liked being a "big sister," and she'd always liked little kids.

Emilia found her artwork was the best way to deal with her feelings during those first few months.

Graduation

As graduation approached, there was a group of students who wanted to create a memorial to the students who died. In consultation with the local mental health clinic, it was decided that setting a precedent to have a memorial at the school could create a problem. Who would decide which deaths deserved memorials and which ones would not?

Mariana shared with Emilia that the mother of a ninth grader, who had died from bone cancer, was upset that her child's death hardly seemed to be acknowledged in the community, as compared with the deaths of these teens in the car accident. This helped Emilia understand what the principal was worried about. Her mother told her that in the PTO meeting, she'd learned that school administrators also worried about honoring students who took their own lives through suicide. It was not good for a troubled student to imagine that suicide would be a way to be publicly memorialized at the school.

In the end, the senior class planted 100 tulips, 100 daffodils and 100 irises in honor of the three students who died. They didn't say which flower was for which teen, but purple was Cassie's favorite color, so Emilia thought of the irises as being for Cassie.

From time to time, Emilia's mother would ask her if she'd been thinking about Cassie or the accident. Emilia found her artwork was the best way of dealing with her feelings during those first few months. She wrote in a diary, too. And rather than talking about Cassie with her mother, Emilia preferred to show her the diary entries about Cassie. It was easier for her. It was hard for Emilia to hear her mother say anything about Cassie's death that didn't feel inadequate and so,

more upsetting. The shared diary entries really worked best. Her mother had talked with her about the importance of sharing any feelings of anxiety or guilt, or of wanting to hurt herself. Emilia knew the “don’t worry alone” rule, and felt sure she’d tell her mother if she were worried about herself. Her mother knew that hearing the phone ring late at night was still awful, but luckily, it happened rarely. When it did, her mother would always check in with her.

Emilia often talked with Cassie in her head. So many things reminded her of her friend and so many times she wanted to tell her about something new. She’d told her mother that she had these

Emilia asked her mother if she could talk with a counselor.

conversations, and her mother had told her she knew it was normal and often helpful. She was glad Emilia was still talking with Cassie. “I hope you’ll sometimes share with me what you share with Cassie,” she’d told her.

Emilia missed Cassie so many times every day for the first many months, but after a while, it began to feel “lighter” somehow. She and her mom talked about Cassie often. Cassie’s parents were always interested in what she was doing and they seemed genuinely glad that she was doing well. She often talked with them before or after hanging out with Doug.

Emilia’s uncle Laz, her mother’s brother, was proud that she’d found healthy ways to deal with her sadness. He told her that he was much older before he figured out how to deal with the sadness and anger he felt when one of his close friends in the Air Force died in a training accident. Her uncle was such a private person; she was surprised when he shared this experience with her. She’d always been close with her mother’s sister, but this helped her feel closer to him, too.

In the spring before she graduated from high school, Emilia asked her mother if she could talk with a counselor. Mariana was happy to help her connect with a therapist. She asked Emilia why she wanted to talk with someone. Emilia said it was hard to feel happy about graduating and going to college when Cassie would never get to go. No one would even know Cassie at college. She felt guilty and lonely, and that nothing about this experience made any sense. She remembered that seeing a counselor had been helpful to Tomás, and she hoped it would be the same for her.



Talking with Children about an Accident 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

- “There was a car accident last night and three teenagers died. It’s very sad.”
- “Matt’s big brother Jeff got hurt sledding. He is in the hospital now. I will bring Matt home to our house after preschool tomorrow, while his parents are with Jeff at the hospital.”

AGES 7–12

- “There was a car accident Friday night; three high school students died and one got badly hurt. I heard on the TV that the driver was going too fast and that he had been drinking alcohol. It is very, very sad for those teenagers, their families, and friends. It is also upsetting that another teen car accident happened involving alcohol.”
- “Jeff was in a serious sledding accident yesterday. He is in the hospital now and I know that he needed surgery. His mother or father will call us tonight with more information. I offered to bring his little brother to our house after preschool tomorrow, so his parents can stay with Jeff at the hospital.”

AGES 13–19

- “There was a car accident last night; three teenagers from Hollingston High School died and another was badly injured. I wonder if you know them or any of their friends. I heard on the news that police said the driver was speeding and that he’d been drinking. It is so, so sad for these teens and for their families. Another teen car accident is so upsetting; drinking and driving is really hard for me to understand.”
- “I wonder if you heard that Louisa’s brother Jeff was in a serious sledding accident yesterday? Mark’s father called us to say that Jeff was taken to the hospital and needed surgery. I know that he hit his head and his side, but I don’t know what kind of surgery he needs. We expect to hear more details from their parents late tonight.”

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?”
 - “Yes, I was talking with Emilia’s mom about a car accident. She told me that three teenagers died in a car accident, and one was Emilia’s friend, Cassie.”
 - “Yes, Jeff did have a cut on his head. He got hurt when he and his sled hit the tree. That is why the ambulance came to take him to the hospital.”

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?”
 - “Yes, three teenagers were killed in the car accident and one was badly injured, but I don’t think there were two cars racing. The police reported that it was only one car and that the driver of the car was driving too fast and had been drinking alcohol, which makes it hard to steer the car.”
 - “That is a good explanation of what happened in Jeff’s sledding accident. The only other thing I know is that he’s having surgery at the hospital today.”

AGES 13–19

- “What have you heard about what happened last night?”
- “What are you hearing from your friends? How about on the Internet?”
- “What do you think about this and how it happened?”
- “Are you especially worried about anyone? How you are feeling? How is this for your other friends?”
- “Sometimes misinformation gets passed around before the true details are known. Have you heard anything that you are not sure is true?”

- “I am glad you’re telling me how upset you are. Losing a good friend is one of the hardest things anyone ever goes through, and it’s normal to feel really, really shocked and upset. It makes sense that Jack’s ex-girlfriend is having a very hard time. Are you worried that she might hurt herself?”
- “The post you saw about Jeff is not true. I spoke with his parents after they arrived at the hospital and he was not “brain dead.” I wish I had more details, but we’ll have to wait until his parents call to learn more about how he is doing.”

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 upset? Did you know why I was so worried?”
- “You saw me crying when I was talking with Emilia’s mother. I was very sad because she told me that Emilia’s friend, Cassie, died in a car accident.”
- “Did you hear me telling Mommy about Jeff’s sledding accident? I was so surprised and I wanted Mommy to come downstairs right away so that I could tell her. I yelled her name, didn’t I? I wasn’t mad, I was just worried.”

AGES 7–12

- “You saw me crying when I was talking with Doug’s mother. His sister Cassie died in a car accident and I feel so sad for everyone in their family.”
- “You could see that I got angry when I was talking with Hank about the car accident involving the teens from Hollingston. Hank said he would not do it, but that it wasn’t such a big deal to drink alcohol and drive a car—but I really disagree. It upset me that he doesn’t think it is as dangerous as it is.”

AGES 13–19

- “I am obviously so shaken up by this news about your track teammates. It is so upsetting, but I am very glad that you told me. What else have you heard about this accident?”
- “You could see how upset I was. In all the years that we’ve gone to that hill to go sledding, this is the first serious accident I have seen. It must have been scary for all the younger kids who saw this happen and heard Jeff’s father shouting for us to call 911. I was very glad to see the ambulance arrive and have the EMTs take over.”

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

- “Daddy and I are going to Jorge’s funeral at the church after lunch. Maria will be baby-sitting for you. Last time Maria was here you drew pictures together. You can draw or paint with her today.”
- “I know that Matt will come to our house after preschool this afternoon. I will talk with his parents while you are at school, and I can tell you at pick-up whether he will be staying for dinner or staying for a sleepover.”

AGES 7–12

- “After we learn more about what happened, we can try to understand it together.”
- “It will likely take at least a couple of days before we know how Jeff is doing. I’ll let you know what I learn each day from his parents. They are seeing Jeff and talking with his doctors.”

AGES 13–19

- “After we learn more about what happened and all the reactions to it, we should keep talking about this.”
- “You may be learning about things before I do, and may know more about what happened, what your classmates are doing, how they’re feeling, and what the school is planning. Please keep me in the loop, and I’ll share what I hear, too.”

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 or confused.”

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.”

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

- “When someone dies, we try to take care of their family and friends. I’m going to send some flowers to Cassie’s family and also to her friend, Emilia.”
- “Wearing seatbelts helps a lot to keep us safe in the car.”
- “Jeff will be in the hospital for a few more days. We are lucky that we live near good doctors and nurses who can take really good care of him.”

AGES 7–12

- “Accidents that involve drinking, like this one, are part of the reason I want to make sure you are really comfortable standing up to your friends when they are acting in ways you know aren’t right. That’s why we talk so much about bullying and peer pressure.”
- “I am going to be extra strict about you wearing a helmet when you ski, sled, or bike. Jeff’s accident is a big reminder about how important it is to take the precautions we can.”

AGES 13–19

- “I know you have said that you would never drink and drive. What do you think you would do if you realized a driver had been drinking after you were already in the car? Maybe this is a good chance to think that through together.”
- “Something like this really puts into perspective all the stress you’ve been feeling about your grades. Let’s try to figure out a better balance for you.”

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
Developing Resilience through Engagement, Awareness and Media

