



The Anniversary of September 11th: Parents' Guide for Talking to their Children

Why should I talk about this with my children?

As the anniversary of September 11th approaches, many of us are thinking about how to recognize and memorialize the events and the losses of that tragic time in ways that also respond to the needs of our children. It is especially important to consider these issues in the context of the ongoing threats of terrorism that our nation continues to face. In remembering the tragedy of 9/11, as adults, we must try our best to support each other and our children, coming together as families, communities and a nation.

As parents and caregivers, it is our responsibility to help children understand the events around the anniversary of September 11th and to do our best to provide children with the help and support they might need. Parents are the central sources of safety and security for their children. Children of different ages see what happens, understand it and react to it differently. As adults we must remember that we cannot assume that our children's worries are the same as our own. It is important to try and understand a child's perspective from their own point of view and not impose our own ideas or beliefs upon them. If you feel too anxious or overwhelmed to talk to your children about these issues, ask a relative or a friend to talk to your children and find someone you can talk to as well. When we as adults are able to listen to our children's feelings and concerns, we can help them learn, understand and feel more safe and secure in their world.

When using these guidelines, it is important to keep the following things in mind:

- Reactions will vary from child to child depending upon a variety of factors including their personality, age, developmental level and personal history.
- When thinking about how to talk to your children, take your cues from them in terms of what they need and what they are thinking and feeling.
- Start by checking in with your children and listening to their concerns.
- There is no one "best way" to react to or acknowledge the anniversary of 9/11.
- Talking about the memorial events can be a means to help children better understand the world and can further the process of healing and learning.
- Not all children will appear to be affected by these events, and for some children, especially younger children, it may not be appropriate to "force the issue" if they are not aware of or concerned about the anniversary.
- Children who were directly impacted by the events of September 11th or who have had a history of loss or trauma are most vulnerable.
- Helping children deal with a difficult event is hard work—parents should seek help and support when needed.

What reactions should we expect to see in our children at the anniversary?

In the days and weeks surrounding the anniversary, much attention will be given to these events by the media as well as in our communities, neighborhoods, places of worship, workplaces and in our children's schools. The actual date of September 11th has taken on such strong meaning that we shouldn't be surprised that many people will have strong reactions during the anniversary. Many children and adults may still be having significant reactions to the events that happened almost a year ago and it is not unusual for the anniversary of an event to bring up intense memories or concerns. Children may re-experience some of the feelings associated with the scary events that occurred a year ago. Children and families who have experienced a direct loss or who were directly impacted by the events of 9/11 are especially vulnerable to experiencing ongoing difficulties.

Children are likely to react in a variety of ways. Some children may even seem to be unconcerned about the anniversary and be frustrated by the amount of coverage it receives. Some children may appear "back to normal" but may still be feeling sad, scared, or anxious or angry. Other ways that children and adults can experience an anniversary reaction is through changes in mood, irritability, changes in academic performance, changes in appetite or behavioral problems. It is important to remember that any of these reactions can be appropriate and that during this difficult time we must be tolerant of the variety of ways in which children and adults remember and experience these troubling events. However, if these difficulties become pronounced or of concern to you as a parent or caregiver, you should seek help from your pediatrician or other trusted healthcare professional.

What questions are children likely to have?

❖ Why are people so upset and why is the anniversary getting so much attention?

Very young and preschool aged children in particular do not understand time in the same way that adults do, or give as much value to dates and anniversaries. Therefore, many children may not understand why the anniversary of 9/11 is receiving so much attention. However, the meaning that adults give to the anniversary will have a direct impact on how children experience these events. It is important to explain to children that it is not uncommon or unusual to re-experience some of the strong feelings associated with a loss or tragedy around the time of an anniversary. In order to cope with these feelings and acknowledge the tragedy that many Americans endured, people will commemorate the anniversary with a variety of activities and memorial events. National media coverage of these commemorative events is likely to be widespread. These events may occur in small group settings in families or neighborhoods, or involve larger scale memorial events in children's schools and communities across the country. Children may wish to participate in these events in a variety of ways. Often, being involved in the planning of memorial activities is just as important for children as participating in them. Memorial activities that involve children should be appropriate to their age and developmental level. Memorial events around the anniversary of 9/11 also provide parents with an opportunity to talk to their children about what has happened, as well as reassure them about any fears or concerns they may have.

❖ Are we safe and will it happen again?

The terrorist acts of September 11th surprised all of us and impacted our sense of safety and security in our country and around the world. Since the attacks, there has been a wide range of efforts made to ensure our nation's safety and to combat terrorism. Our country's military, law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency service personnel, educators, parents and government leaders are focused on keeping our children and our country safe. Over the past year our government has worked hard to find the people responsible for these events and to help the world become a more peaceful place as soon as possible. Children also need to be reassured that our government is taking a range of precautions to prevent any further incidents of terrorism. But when children ask general questions about safety, often they are really looking for reassurance that their immediate world of family, friends, and other important figures in their lives are now safe.

The amount of details that children will find useful will depend on their age. The older the child is, the more details will likely be discussed. Provide the basic information in simple and direct terms and then ask for questions. Take your cues from your child in determining how much information to provide. Provide reassurance whenever possible and remind them that they are not at great risk of danger.

It is impossible for us, as adults, to predict if these events will happen again. It is important to reassure our children that their parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults --including the president and our national leaders—are doing everything possible to keep them safe. However, it is also important, especially with older children, to engage them in honest discussions about safety and security in our world. It is sometimes a difficult role as parents to be straightforward and honest with our children while at the same time providing them with reassurance. But it is important to remember that our children look to us for a sense of safety, security and stability in their world.

❖ ***Who do we blame?***

It is understandable that people would be angry with the individuals who commit acts of terrorism. In the past year the government has identified Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorists as being primarily responsible for these events and many efforts have been made to remove them from power and stop their terrorist network. But sometimes people are also angry with those people that are easier to find and blame – such as people who look like they might belong to the group that might have been responsible. Children should be told that although it is normal to feel angry, at this time it is important to remember that these acts of terrorism were committed by a small number of people who do not represent a particular race or ethnic group. The United States is a country that prides itself in having members of many different races and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together as a country, not to search to blame members of our country. It is important to let children know that our government is taking action to defend our country against those who threaten us.

As a parent, how do I answer these questions? I don't want to make things worse, so should I say nothing instead?

Often what children need most is someone whom they trust who will listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns and thoughts, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep our children from ever having to hear about something like this, reality does not allow this. Silence won't protect them from what

happened, only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that listening, answering, and reassuring should be at the level of the child's understanding.

What if this discussion upsets them?

Many children, especially older children, will want to talk about the events around the anniversary of 9/11. However, when you talk with your children about these issues it is possible that they may become upset. In some cases they may even cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are upset. Remember, it is really the events that are upsetting them, not talking to you. Talking is an important means of sharing your feelings and learning how to cope and adjust with loss. It is okay if your children get upset when talking about scary or disturbing things, but as a parent you can reassure them and help them to feel safe and secure. Make sure your children realize it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

What if they don't ask any questions – should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?

When upsetting things happen, it is a good idea to be ready to talk with your children. At first, older children may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. In most cases it is not a good idea to force them to talk with you, but instead keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Keep an invitation open, but wait until they accept. Often children find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling instead of talking about themselves. Think about how your children dealt with prior crises in the past and consider trying now what helped them when they were upset or worried before.

What if my child doesn't seem upset by events around the anniversary?

Many children may appear disinterested in the anniversary and even irritated by the continued attention focused on these events. The size and scope of a child's world is smaller than that of an adult -- the crisis may simply not have affected them directly; they may be far more concerned about their own life. Young children may not understand, or even know, much about what has happened or what it means. Other children may be concerned, but afraid to ask questions or to share their feelings. Children may visit their concerns briefly, but then turn to play or involve themselves in schoolwork before they allow themselves to feel overwhelmed. They may express their feelings indirectly through play or through changes in their behavior. For all of these reasons, it is easy for adults to underestimate children's reactions or expect reactions from children when none are warranted. However, it is important not to assume that they are upset, but not talking about. It might be easier to ask them what other kids in school are saying about the anniversary as a way of giving them the opportunity to talk.

How do I know if my child needs more help than I can provide? Where would I go for such help?

Like the tragedy itself, the anniversary may evoke a range of upsetting but "normal" reactions. If your children continue to seem to be particularly or unusually upset for several days – especially

if they are upset or worried about many things, or they are having (more) trouble in school, home or with their friends -- then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. You may wish to speak with your children's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they NEED counseling – you should take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

Many schools and communities will plan memorial and commemorative events around the time of the one-year anniversary of September 11th. You may have questions about whether your child should take part in these events and how to make sure your child benefits the most from participating.

Why is it helpful to have children participate in a memorial event at school or in the community?

Memorial events can help children express and cope with feelings that might otherwise seem overwhelming to deal with alone. By planning and taking part in a memorial event, children can take at least some control over how they will remember the events. But for memorial events to have meaning for children, they must be involved actively in the planning process and the events should be relevant to their interests and developmental needs. Adults should avoid telling children what they should feel or how they should express their feelings – instead, adults must try to listen to children and follow their lead.

In addition to remembering the losses associated with the events of September 11th, it is also important to highlight community strengths and to foster a sense of hope for the future. For example, some schools may choose to honor the anniversary by conducting classroom or school-wide activities that aim to promote tolerance for cultural and ethnic diversity, address how to resolve conflict in non-destructive ways, or help children think about how their community service can help them contribute to and enhance their local communities. Such activities may be coordinated with memorial activities; in some schools, they may be the main focus of activities on the anniversary.

Should all children be involved in memorial events? What if my child doesn't wish to participate?

Different groups of children and adults will have different needs and wishes at the time of the anniversary. Some children may wish to acknowledge the anniversary in a personally meaningful manner, but resist a group activity; others may prefer not to mark the anniversary with any formal or even informal activity. Adults should respect the wishes of these children and resist attempts to force or coerce them to take part in planning or participating in memorial activities. Parents should speak with their children's teacher if they feel it best not to have their child participate in a memorial event in school – the school can arrange an alternate activity.

Could my child become upset from participation?

Children who have experienced a personal loss, whether or not it is related to the events of September 11th, may find the memorial activities take on a much more personal nature. A crisis

often uncovers feelings related to other current or past troubling events, such as the death by natural cause of a family member or friend. Children who are dealing with their reactions to personal losses may be more likely to become upset during a memorial event. Some of these children may be reluctant to take part in such activities. Other children, because of their own personal experiences, may feel a personal connection with the event and have an even greater interest in participating. The best way to find out about how children are feeling about participating is to ask them.

If you do have any concerns about your child's participation in a memorial event in school, it is important to talk with your child's teacher and/or another staff member in the school. Telling school staff about your concerns or relevant family experiences helps the school better support your child. Children can also be told about what will be discussed in class or what is planned for a school-wide event and reassured that no one will disclose their personal experiences and that there is no need for them to share their personal experiences or feelings with their classmates. It is important that you follow-up with your children to make sure that they are finding their participation in the memorial and commemorative events to be personally helpful.

What can I do at home to help my child prepare for and understand better the memorial events in the school or community?

Many children will be more comfortable beginning the discussions of their feelings related to September 11th within their own families. You can help in this way to prepare them for the conversations and activities that will happen in school. If you start this dialogue, children may be more likely to bring to your attention the concerns or reactions they may have after the events.

Too much attention to the anniversary can also cause problems. Parents should think about limiting the amount of television coverage, especially of graphic material that may be broadcast on the anniversary, particularly for younger children. If older children and adolescents do view television coverage, you should try to watch along with them and use it as an opportunity to discuss not only what you are seeing, but how it makes you feel. Videotaping the broadcast allows parents and children to pause the tape for discussion or if they are feeling overwhelmed. Remember, children are aware of what we as adults watch on television, even if we don't think they are paying attention. This is a particularly good time to avoid leaving the television on for long periods of time. Turn the television off – it will help you focus better on your children.

What if I have more questions? Where can I turn for answers?

You may have many more questions or concerns. If you are concerned about your child please contact a trusted professional in your community. If you would like further information, you may also contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence through our website at www.nccev.org or by calling 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238).