

## **The New School Year and September 11, 2001**

### **Helping Children Navigate the Words and Images of 9/11**

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It is the end of summer and the homes of “9/11” families begin to fill with anxiety. This particular year we are all beginning to get anxious. It is the ten-year anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, or 9/11, the numeric shorthand that has forever labeled this horrific day in our history. The school year begins after Labor Day and within days it will be September 11<sup>th</sup>. The airwaves are already filled with reminders of the trauma and loss associated with this painful day. Families who have been directly and most intimately affected by the terrorist attacks, those who have lost someone close to them, have the greatest difficulty preparing for and surviving the anniversary season. We had a brief preview of what was to come when Osama bin Laden was killed this past May. How should we talk about these issues with children? What about those who are too young to remember or born after 2001? How do we control and monitor media consumption? How can we help children feel safe?

Here are some recommendations for families and schools as they struggle with these questions.

First, it is important for parents and family members to take the lead and provide the “insulation” that affords children the protections and tools they need as they experience September 11 in the world outside of their homes, and that includes classrooms, school buses and even the playground.

- Most importantly, talk about the events of 9/11 and how it affected your family. Tell the story of that day . . . every year. Do not think that your child “knows” the story already. Remember that a child, who was 5 years old in 2001, did not understand death, loss and separation or the magnitude of the event itself. As that child grows he or she is ready to learn the story again, and each time from a different perspective, as a grade-schooler, a middle schooler, a high schooler or a college student. There will be different questions each year and an opportunity for families to clarify and re-explain as needed.
- Families should talk about the media and how it affects people. Children and their families need to know how they can inoculate themselves from media images and words that are intrusive or inappropriate. Such strategies might include: avoid news on TV or radio for the week before 9/11 or watch the news together, as a family, and talk about it or write a letter to the newspaper.
- Talk to your children's teachers; discuss your concerns, ask the teachers to be sensitive to discussion in the classroom and the use of any visual materials related to 9/11 (no graphic images).
- For those children and teens directly affected, explain that while their loss is so very personal, there are hundreds of other children who also lost a parent on that day. They are

not alone. This is not meant to minimize their loss in any way, but lets them know that there are other young people who have the same feelings.

- Tell children and teens that many people across the globe lost someone on September 11<sup>th</sup>. It was a worldwide tragic event, those who died lived in NY, NJ, and 36 other states, and 60 countries. Millions of other people were affected as well - some were injured, some worked at the World Trade Center, and some lived near the buildings. Think of the metaphor of a stone dropping into a pond with ever widening circles. In the center is the deepest ripple, the people most directly affected by September 11, husbands, wives, children, parents, and siblings. As the circular ripples extend outward, reaching friends, neighbors and co-workers, they diminish in strength but they are present nonetheless.
- If after much consideration, some parents may choose to keep their children home before or after September 11<sup>th</sup>. However, plan to do something meaningful to honor those who died on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Could they share their experience with others, either in a one-to-one or in a small group?
- Finally, it is unrealistic to ask schools to remove all reminders of September 11<sup>th</sup>, or forbid discussion or presentations about it in the classroom. If we do nothing, do not talk about the event itself and its consequences, if we do not honor those who lost their lives and those who volunteered to help the victims, many of our children will not understand the significance of September 11<sup>th</sup> to this nation and the world or appreciate the historic lessons that came from it. Far worse is the possibility that they may only learn what the terrorists hope they'll learn; to promote fear by focusing on the death and destruction that the terrorists created. Teachers and schools are urged to use the tremendous resources available to them regarding "how" to teach the events of 9/11 in a sensitive, meaningful way<sup>1</sup>. With these tools, future generations will be able to appreciate and respect the importance of September 11th in our history and realize that even encountering so much hate and pain, many people responded to 9/11 with courage, selflessness and goodness to others.

<sup>1</sup>The 4 Action Initiative is a collaboration of Families of September 11, Liberty Science Center and The NJ Commission on Holocaust Education. *Learning from the Challenges of Our Times: Global Security, Terrorism and 9/11 in the Classroom* was introduced in July 2011. <https://sites.google.com/site/the4actioninitiative/>