

## **Creating a Safe Space in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers and Schools Preparing for September 11, 2011**

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As you prepare for the new school year and the 10-year commemoration of September 11, 2001 (9/11) recognize that media and classroom topics may affect students in a variety of ways. Even if your students are too young to remember September 11, 2001 or weren't born yet, they may know about the events of that day from their families or classmates. While some of the topics can frighten them, it is important to help students understand their complex world by having open discussions and, more importantly, how people in our communities can take action to make the world a better and safer place. Whether children are exposed to a single traumatic event in their classroom such as the loss of a peer or teacher or if the entire school is witness to a national tragedy, schools and teachers are ideally positioned to partner with families and communities to support and promote resilience in children during these difficult times.

Below are some suggestions for keeping your classroom a safe space and recognizing the needs of your students. An important first step is to appreciate how the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> affect you.

1. Be aware of how *your* experiences, reactions and thoughts may influence how you present and react to the material in the classroom.
  - Enlist a support system, talk about the lessons and your reactions to them.
  - If you are comfortable, tell your 9/11 story to the students. You are one of their most important connections with this profound event in our history.
2. Recognize that students K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are too young to fully understand the concepts of terrorism and the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01.
  - Focus on lessons about helping others and building positive relationships.
3. In researching the subject matter of 9/11 and terrorism, provide a list of acceptable websites or print materials for students.
4. Create a physical classroom environment that is safe and comfortable
  - Be aware that media as well as film, photos, videos, and audio recordings have potential impact upon students.
  - Avoid using traumatic images of destruction; instead focus on rebuilding and resilience.
  - Post opportunities to take positive action, such as school or community projects.

5. Be sensitive to the religious diversity in your classroom
  - Choose your language carefully when referring to the perpetrators.
  - Educators should be mindful of stereotyping the Muslim community in particular and how this could have an impact upon students.
  
6. Before talking about 9/11 or terrorism, ask if any students or their family members know people who were directly or indirectly affected by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.
  - Ask students if they've heard their friends talking about 9/11.
  - Be sensitive to the needs of students who may have stronger ties to these topics, give them the option of observing or not participating at all, if they wish.
  - Encourage students to talk about these topics with their families.
  
7. Recognize that a wide range of reactions (physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral or spiritual in nature) to a disaster or traumatic event is expected and natural with most of us. The key is to emphasize that these responses are common.
  - Tell your students that talking about difficult topics may cause people to experience different kinds of emotions. This is not unusual.
  
8. Be mindful of trauma and how it has played a role in the lives of your students.
  - Be sensitive to the vulnerability of students who have a history of trauma in their own lives and how they may connect 9/11 to their personal experiences.
  
9. Avoid having students engage in educational activities that simulate the roles of terrorists, perpetrators, bystanders, victims etc.
  - From an educational viewpoint, simulating an event of this magnitude and asking students to respond to the simulation is unrealistic and pedagogically flawed.
  - From a psychological perspective, simulations may trigger earlier experiences in a setting where a student may feel unprotected or can not speak about his feeling
  
10. Be aware of how your students react and cope with potentially difficult subjects.
  - Keep the lines of communication open through your availability and accessibility, be honest and supportive.
  - Recognize children who may be in the greatest need and if you have concerns about a student speak to someone about him or her.

<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. The curriculum *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/>