

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION. . .

Suggestions for talking to children about September 11, 2001

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As adults we struggle with how to talk to our children about September 11, 2001 (9/11). Some experts suggest starting with simple facts, and not giving more information than a child needs. But what does that mean? What words should we use? How much detail should we provide? And how do we begin the conversation with children who are so young that their only information about 9/11 is from parents, older siblings, family or friends. The following suggestions may help you begin this important conversation.

- **Preparing for a conversation about September 11, 2001.**
 - Explain why we say '9/11' when referring to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001
 - Use September 11th or 9/11, (nine-eleven) the numeric shorthand used to label this day in history.
 - A calendar will help illustrate this for younger children.
 - Do *not* use 9-1-1
 - Saying 9-1-1 (nine-one-one) is confusing, 911 is the emergency telephone number for the North American Numbering Plan
 - Correct those who may be using this term in front of children.
 - Geographic Considerations
 - Remember this is not just a New York, or Washington, or Pennsylvania tragedy. Children and teens can appreciate that people all over the world were affected by the terrorist attacks.
 - Young people in the metropolitan areas surrounding NY and Washington may be much more savvy about using certain words (9/11, terrorism, etc) but they may not have full comprehension of their meanings.
 - Remember that as a child matures he or she will have increasing awareness and continuing questions about September 11, 2001.
 - Ten years is a long time in a young person's life. A child who was barely five years old in 2001 will be at a completely different developmental stage in 2011.
 - As children cognitively mature they are able to comprehend much more information. Adolescents are able to perform abstract reasoning.
 - A child or teen may experience feelings of their younger selves on that day, i.e. a 15 year old remembers the *feelings* related to 9/11 as a 5 year old.
 - Be prepared to revisit the events of 9/11 as a child matures.
 - Allow *time* to talk to children and teens

- Don't leave conversations for the end of the day; children need time to process this information and the opportunity to ask more questions before they go to bed. They also need comfort and reassurance.
 - Find out if September 11, 2001 will be or has been discussed at school, and be sure to continue the conversation at home
 - Ask your children what was discussed in school, what questions they might have, their thoughts and reactions.
 - When there is a great deal of media coverage it is important to start the conversation *before* the media blitz.
 - Be sure to monitor media programs and the news.
- **Beginning the conversation: Finding the Teachable Moment**
 - Be aware of the times children may begin to ask questions about 9/11: news reports, anniversary dates, and overheard conversations.
 - Ask: Have you heard these words (9/11, September 11th)?
 - Then follow with any of these suggested questions and prompts:
 - What have you heard about (9/11, September 11th)?
 - What do you know about September 11th?
 - Maybe you have heard your teachers, friends, kids at school or your older brothers and sisters talk about . . .
 - Maybe you've heard about 9/11 on the radio or the television.
 - For a long time, a lot of people have talked about this day.
- **Tell the story in age-appropriate, non-graphic ways.**
 - Use words that are not inflammatory and not alarming in the way they sound.
 - Using the word "terrorist"
 - Many children today are familiar with the word 'terrorist' but adults should not assume they have a clear understanding of what it means.
 - Research studies have found that children around the age of 10 years are just beginning to understand the concept of terrorism and the magnitude of 9/11.
 - Terrorism is complex idea with no agreed upon definition (by governments or academics). However, many definitions of a terrorist act include these characteristics: premeditated, secret, politically motivated, intended to cause fear in many, and aimed at civilians.

- Young people often describe what a terrorist does, not what he/she is (as compared to an ‘enemy’).
 - Example: “People who wanted to hurt our country, to surprise us, to make us afraid. They were not soldiers. No one knew what they were planning to do.”
 - It is not sufficient to say, “bad” people or people that “don’t like America” as these labels can confuse and complicate.
 - If you (or your child) use the word “terrorist,” first ask what they have heard and begin with what they know. Balance this information with a focus on safety and security.
 - How people are trying to make sure their communities are safe.
 - Airport security, bag searches at baseball parks, museums, etc
 - Do *not* equate terrorism to bullying.
 - They are *not* the same concepts, and there is danger in linking the two words.
 - You do not need to offer detailed time-lines for younger children; broad facts will serve as a foundation for the future.
 - If your child is older and interested in more information, there are a number of online resources that provide information on the events of 9/11/01:
 - The New York State Museum 9/11 Timeline
 - <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/wtc/timeline/>
- **Balance the frightening or sad aspects of 9/11 with examples of how people helped each other.**
 - Begin by stating that most people were able to safely escape from the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Then say that some people did not. Almost 3,000 people died that day, but thousands of people were rescued.
 - Talk about rescue, recovery, and rebuilding efforts specific to your family’s community.
 - Emphasize how people came together and worked to help others as much as they could.
 - The film, *Boatlift*, recounts how panicked residents made their way to the waterfront in Lower Manhattan and boarded a flotilla of ferryboats, Coast Guard vessels, and civilian boats that answered the call. This was the largest boatlift in history since the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk, France, during WWII, and is all the more incredible because it came about spontaneously.

- On 9/11/01 all planes flying over the US were grounded and 38 airplanes were diverted to Canada. The people of Newfoundland welcomed the passenger planes heading west over the Atlantic when more than 6,500 passengers and crew were diverted to Gander International Airport in Newfoundland. The people of Gander, and nearby communities of Gambo, Lewisporte, Appleton and Norris Arm put their lives on hold to feed and shelter the passengers.
 - Describe how laws have changed since 9/11/2001. All around the world governments are trying to make people safer on airplanes and in buildings.
 - Describe how people and governments have changed and tried to be more understanding, getting to know each other better, being more tolerant and working together.
 - Talk about the 9/11 Day of Service. Every year on September 11th, the people of our nation and the world remember the workers, firefighters, police officers, medical workers and other people who died that day.
 - In 2009 the United States congress passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act which established The September 11 National Day of Service and Remembrance. On this date people give service and volunteer to honor those who died.
- **For younger children (8-10), a book may be a useful way to further discuss the story of 9/11.**
 - *14 Cows for America* by Carmen Agra Deedy
 - *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter
 - *Fireboat* by Maira Kalman
 - *The Little Chapel that Stood* by A.B.Curtis
- **Keep the doors of communication open.**
 - For older children and teens, look for signs that this ten year anniversary may trigger uncomfortable feelings such as sleeplessness, fears, anxiety, crying.
 - If you see something that may be upsetting to a child or teen, don't be afraid to begin a conversation on the subject.
 - Share your own experience in positive ways, what you did to help others, or what others did to help you and your community.

¹The 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/>