

## Talking to Your Child About 9/11

By Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D.

As the tenth anniversary approaches, parents may worry about how to have a conversation with their child about this sad event. I recommend that you frame it in such a way that you're not producing unnecessary anxiety for your child, but providing them with enough detail to satisfy their curiosity or concerns. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I was a provider of crisis counseling services to children, teachers and parents under a Project Liberty grant to my agency, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC)

Here are my suggestions.

**Let them know you are there to listen to their questions and concerns.** Some children will talk and some won't. Both of these reactions are okay. What children need is reassurance that you are available to answer their questions when they are ready to discuss 9/11.

When they do raise it, you can ask "What do you want to know about 9/11?" Or, "Why do you think we are remembering the anniversary of 9/11?" Keep your conversation age-appropriate.

**Find out what frightens them and address it.** Most children will want to know the bottom line – Will I be okay, will you be okay and is this going to happen again? Their emotions will vary based on their age, personality, religious background and their connection to the attacks. Also, keep in mind that trauma is cumulative in nature. So, if your child has experienced other traumas in their life, the 9/11 anniversary may put them at risk for higher distress.

**Stick to the facts.** Children may have heard many different and possibly conflicting stories that could cause confusion for them. Be concrete. You can say "On 9/11 there were some people who did not like the United States. They wanted to hurt us, so they flew a plane into a building to try to scare all the people in NYC and around the country. Many people died that day. It was very sad for all of us."

Your child may then raise issues about death and what happens afterwards. Depending on your beliefs, you should answer these questions as best you can.

**Monitor the TV and the Internet.** If they want to watch the memorial service or newscasts, watch them with your child. Be an active participant in monitoring the type of information they receive. Most children under the age of six or seven should probably not be exposed to the media images of the day, as developmentally, they may still not be able to distinguish fact from fiction. I recommend that parents diligently monitor the TV, computer, newspapers, etc. to

make sure that children are not exposed to the graphic, violent repeats.. You can't "unsee" something. Research following 9/11 showed that levels of Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms increased as people's time watching the planes crash into the buildings, the towers imploding, and people fleeing increased. My guess is that the media will be playing these upsetting, dramatic news clips many times over in the next few weeks.

**There were many heroes that day and the days beyond.** Talk about the amazing efforts of the police, firemen, and other first responders, medical providers on that day. It's also good to let them know how everyone in their community banded together to support each other and that the sense of caring for others and patriotism was at an all time high. The anniversary is also a day to recognize those people. It's also provides an opportunity to discuss how important it is to treat others with respect and dignity - even if we do not agree with their views or they seem different from you. Emphasize kindness and hope..

Here are a few scenarios to think about.

If your child becomes upset after reading the newspaper or watching TV, encourage them to discuss their feelings. Normalize and validate them. Don't try to "correct" them. There is no right or wrong feelings and each child's will be different.

Children older than 12 may have memories of the event and be very moody, depressed, anxious, possibly even cry. Acknowledge that this anniversary makes many people very sad. It's completely understandable. Praise your child for being able to express their feelings. Then talk about what might make them feel better, for younger children, diverting them with play is helpful. For older children, it may be watching a comedy or uplifting movie.

If your child asks "**What is a terrorist?**" you can tell them that a terrorist is someone who tries to hurt and scare people. They are trying to make people afraid. Terror is another word for being very scared. I would then add that there are not many terrorists in the world, but there are many good people in the world working hard to keep them safe.

If your child asks "**Why did they do that to NYC?**", you can say "The men who flew the planes into the buildings were terrorists. They did not like America and were very angry. They did this to scare people and to cause much harm and damage to the people who live here. Most people do not feel this way about America."

Stay away from going into detail about Al Queda and other terrorist groups if possible. Your child needs reassurance that he/she is safe and not in danger. 9/11 was unprecedented and nothing of this magnitude has happened since in the United States.

If your child asks “**Will it happen again?**” you can tell them that “from the President of the U.S. to our local police and firemen, many steps have been taken over the past 10 years to keep us safe. And, not just from terrorism but from other threats too like fires, floods, and crime.

**Family Emergency Plan.** You may also want to reassure your child by creating an emergency plan. Calmly explain to your child you are ready for an emergency and have a plan that will keep them safe.

The components that you should cover are:

- Contact person(s) in case of an emergency. What will happen if they are in school or you are in work or separated from them. Who is the “go to” at that time?
- The meeting location if family members are separated.
- How to call 911 if an emergency happens in the home.
- Emergency supplies that you keep at home, medicine, money and a cell phone, canned food, water, flashlight, battery operated radio, first aid kit, etc.

Review the plan with your child when it is NOT an emergency so they can digest it and ask questions that may come up before an emergency arises.

**Keep tabs on yourself.** You probably have strong feelings about the anniversary too. Anniversary reactions such as intrusive thoughts, being hyper-vigilant, or trying to avoid reminders about 9/11 are common. It’s okay to share how you are feeling with your children. You will serve as a role model for them and reassure them that these hard conversations are possible.

For more information about keeping your child safe visit The NYSPCC’s website [www.nyspcc.org](http://www.nyspcc.org)