

By Harold S. Koplewicz, MD

We approach the 10th anniversary of 9/11 with awe and some dread: it's extraordinary that a decade has passed, that we have moved forward one day after another, through grief and loss, new joys and sorrows, new accomplishments and concerns.

For all New Yorkers, the memories of that terrible day are still sharp and the wounds tender. But for those of you we have come to call 9/11 families, the pain has been much more personal, and the rebuilding of your lives has been arduous and filled with struggle, even as you've had the pleasure of watching your children change and grow, and seeing their resilience.

Children who were infants and toddlers—or not yet born—the day of the attacks are now middle schoolers. Those who were just old enough to understand what happened are in high school and heading off to college. Kids who were in high school may have families of their own. Children, after all, are incapable of standing still.

With the 10th anniversary you and your children will be surrounded by public events and media coverage that aim to honor those who lost their lives on 9/11, and to take stock of how we as a nation and a city have responded, and been changed, by those attacks. As a child psychiatrist, I wonder how we can pay our respects—both to the dead and the families who suffered their loss—without putting new stress on those same families.

Those searing images of the burning towers, and the towers coming down, are bound to be replayed by the networks 24/7. Whether you welcome this reexamination, or dread the public reopening of personal wounds, your children are sure to be affected.

What that will mean to each child—whether it will reinforce healing or stimulate grief or regret or anger—depends on the child's age, his circumstances, and the behavior of those close to him. Obviously no one can tell you what your own child needs, but I hope I can offer some observations from years of dealing with vulnerable children that might make your job a little easier.

1. Take your cues from your child—each child, separately, if you have several. Let them tell you whether they want to participate in public events or might want some sort of family

commemoration. Children, and adolescents in particular, often resent being expected to have appropriate feelings on demand. Some may find these events meaningful and helpful; others may not welcome the public focus on something so intensely personal.

2. Share but don't impose your feelings. They should know that it's okay if you are still grieving, 10 years later—even if you've built a new life—but it doesn't mean they have to feel the same way. You also want them to know that your feeling sad doesn't mean you can't function as their parent, assure them that they can still count on you. You can tell them—and remind yourself—that while in certain ways 10 years hasn't distanced you from the events of that day, 10 years is a long time, especially in the life and mind of a child, who may also not have many, if any, memories of the loved ones they lost.

3. Let them know it's okay to move on. In fact, it's healthy and important to move on. It's all right if they don't see this as an opportunity to revisit the event that took their mother or father, grandmother or grandfather, brother or sister, aunt or uncle, if they don't want to share their thoughts. It's helpful to them if they don't feel you depend on them to perform in a prescribed way. They may be attached to a new step-parent; if so that's a good thing, and we don't want them to feel guilty.

4. If a child is too young to remember 9/11 or the family member she lost in the attacks, take your cues from her about whether this is a good time to focus on that parent. Don't force the issue. But if you see the time is right, you may want to use the event to invite questions, to take an inventory of what she knows and thinks she knows, and provide more details—sharing photos and happy memories, for example—in an age-appropriate way. This will help her fill in the picture she's created for herself.

5. Let children know that, as they grow and change, their feelings about the person they lost will grow and change, too. Their sense of who their father or mother was, how that parent has influenced who they are, how the loss has influenced who they are, isn't static. Grief may have a relatively short half-life for a child, but the importance of a parent doesn't; the more sophisticated the child becomes, the more he can know, and may want to know, about that absent person. Remarkably many people literally get to know their parents after they're gone.

6. Try to avoid exposing children to the intrusive, repetitive TV news coverage, especially the pictures of 9/11 we saw for weeks and months after the event. They can make children feel invaded and stimulate unwanted emotions.

7. Focus on community. If you participate in 9/11 anniversary events, focus on helping your children feel part of a community. Let them share events with other children who lost parents, and give them opportunities to be of service to other people—a great way to help kids not only feel good about themselves but learn a very healthy way to respond to grief.

8. Let them know how proud you are of them on this day, as on other days: How much joy and pride their growth over the past 10 years have brought you, how their love and laughter have helped you recover from the tragedy, how proud the parent they lost would be of their accomplishments, and how much that person is still with them and loves them.

Whatever your children's needs may be on this anniversary, I urge you to think, too, of your own needs, and the renewed anguish this commemoration may cause you. While we talk a lot about heroes when we talk about the tragedy of 9/11, the surviving parents who supported their children through the immediate aftermath, and in all the years since, are my heroes.

Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D. is a leading child and adolescent psychiatrist, a member of the advisory board of Tuesday's Children, and the president of the [Child Mind Institute](#). For more parenting tips, go to [childmind.org](#), which also offers a wealth of information on childhood psychiatric and learning disorders.

If you or your family are having concerns about the upcoming 10th Anniversary, please contact Fran Furman, Tuesday's Children's Director of Counseling, at 516.562.9000 or fran@tuesdayschildren.org

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