

This information was developed by the NYU Child Study Center for parents of all children, regardless of the impact of 9/11 on their lives. It provides guidelines to parents and family members on how to talk to children and adolescents about the events of 9/11. It also provides tips on how to support children and help them cope with their feelings and thoughts related to the anniversary.

The following guidelines are proposed to help parents and adults talk to and provide support to children and adolescents. Although this guide was developed primarily for parents and family members, the information and suggestions may also be helpful to other important adults, such as teachers and mentors.

### Talking to Children about 9/11

Parents often ask when is the right time to talk to children and adolescents about 9/11. This question is often raised for children who were too young to recall the events of that day. Although there is no hard and fast rule about the “correct” time to bring up the topic, the following section provides some tips on how to raise the topic of 9/11 and the upcoming anniversary with children.

- **Pick the appropriate time and place.** Choose a location where you will be able to talk to your children without external distractions and for a sufficient period of time. It is best to pick a time when other pressing responsibilities (e.g., car pool, homework) or ongoing activities (e.g., playing a game or watching television) are not going to interfere with your talk.

- **Know your children.** Some children are naturally more prone to being reactive to information they hear about 9/11 and the anniversary, while others may not be as reactive. When speaking with your children, it is important to consider their age and maturity as well as their individual personality style and temperament. Children’s ability to process and understand issues of death and terrorism is highly dependent on their age.

- **Take the first step and address the issue directly.** It is often necessary for you to initiate the dialogue yourself. You can preface the discussion by stating that you are aware that there is increased discussion about 9/11 and want to have a talk about the anniversary of the event. A good starting point is to ask children what they have heard or remember about 9/11 or what they have heard or seen about the anniversary.

- **Do not make assumptions.** Do not assume that your children will know all the details about 9/11. On the flip side, you may be surprised that your children know more than you thought they did. Children are exposed to information on a daily basis, through school, peers, the internet, television, movies, and bill boards. If you are surprised by what your children know,

find out more about their source of information.

- **Provide facts and information.** As difficult as it may be, it is important to state the facts in an objective manner to your children. Speak to them about what to expect prior to the anniversary. Discuss the increased media attention, images on television, the internet, printed media, and memorials. Talk to your children about the possibility of memorials at school and other community-based activities.

- **Be honest and open.** Children and adolescents may be more likely to open up about their feelings when parents take the lead and discuss their own thoughts about a given situation. Sharing your own feelings may help to normalize the experiences of your children.

- **Be objective.** When talking to your children about 9/11, it is important to avoid making generalizations about groups of individuals which may dehumanize the situation. It is also critical that adults avoid burdening children with their own fears, anger, or concerns.

- **Listen and invite questions.** Listen to your children's thoughts, feelings, and questions. Encourage your children to ask questions about aspects of 9/11 they may remember and information they may have obtained through the media and other sources. This is especially important for the younger children who may not recall the events of 9/11 as they unfolded. By answering children's questions, parents can correct misinformed assumptions and reduce anxiety, fear, and confusion. If adults do not address these questions and concerns, children may try to put together potentially incorrect or confusing information from other sources, including each other.

- **Focus on feelings and thoughts.** Parents should not make assumptions about children's thoughts, perceptions, or concerns. You are encouraged to provide your children with an opportunity to openly talk about their perception. Assure children that their feelings and thoughts are valid, even if you do not agree with them.

## Tips for Families and Friends Who Lost a Loved One on 9/11

- **Do the best you can.** Getting through the anniversary will take a lot of energy. There is no "correct" or "incorrect" way to handle the anniversary and the memorial services. Do what you believe is best for your family's well-being.

- **Speak to children's teachers and school professionals.** If children will be in school or elsewhere, obtain information about what is planned for the anniversary, or the days leading up to the anniversary. This is especially important so that parents can speak to children prior to the event to prepare them for any specially planned activities and memorials.

- **Attend to feelings.** Be mindful of expectations and feelings about the day and its meaning. The significance of the day may provoke complicated emotions. Relief when the day is over may be mixed with further realization of all that has happened and how different life has become. Not only will the day bring remembrances of a difficult event or of a person who died, it

can also stir feelings and reactions related to the original event. Such an “anniversary” reaction would not be unusual, where there is a re-experiencing of similar thoughts and emotions from the original tragedy.

- **Describe the situation clearly to your children.** Talk openly with your children about the upcoming anniversary and anticipated family involvement. Describe what will take place in simple and clear language. Explain what they will see and how people might react. At any age, children can become confused by the events and by seeing other people’s expressions of strong emotions.

- **Instill hope.** Tell your children that by being prepared and anticipating the anniversary and increased attention on 9/11, they will be able to better cope.

- **Consider options.** Consider how different options for the anniversary fit your needs and address your feelings. Decide if you prefer to be part of a large public gathering, traditional community ceremonies, or an intimate personal memorial.

- **Plan as a family. In planning with your children:**

- Know your child: Consider your children’s emotional functioning, developmental level, and wishes when planning events for the anniversary.

- Make joint decisions: Adults and children will feel empowered and in control if everyone in the family has input in the decision-making process. Make decisions according to each individual’s needs and wants, and respect everyone’s wishes.

- Listen: Open and honest discussions with your children regarding thoughts, concerns, and feelings about the anniversary are important. Ask your children what they would like to do regarding the anniversary. Listen to and be open to their suggestions and consider their feelings, ideas and concerns. Try to incorporate everyone’s ideas when making a decision.

- Expect emotions: Even those who have been effectively coping with the trauma or death may experience troubling thoughts or feelings in relation to the anniversary or planning for a memorial service.

- Respect your children’s needs: Some children may resist becoming involved in planning for the anniversary. Respect your children’s needs and feelings in these situations. Allow your children to decide for themselves what their comfort level is regarding their involvement in planning for the anniversary. Attendance and involvement in memorial services should be an option and not a requirement for children.

- Provide choices: Involvement in the anniversary does not have to be all or nothing. Parents and teachers should plan different options of activities for the anniversary so that children and adolescents can have a choice regarding their level of involvement.

- **Plan ahead.** After making a decision about the anniversary, plan all aspects of the event ahead of time. Review the details of the memorial and consider any aspects which may make you or your children feel uncomfortable.

- **Problem solve.** Have a discussion with your children about how they will cope when faced with news or images about an upcoming movie or the anniversary. Come up with a plan on how children can change their level of involvement on the day of the anniversary or be able to leave the situation or event.

- **Anticipate children’s reactions.** Think ahead so you can deal with moments that may be awkward or upsetting for children. Consider and anticipate your children’s reactions to planned

events. Talk to your children about their feelings and concerns prior to the event and problem solve ways in which you can help them better cope.

- **Be prepared for change.** Plans may be put in place but as the day draws closer, feelings and needs may change. Being flexible and making new plans may be necessary. Children may change their mind about their level of involvement in the anniversary memorial. Give them permission to withdraw and re-enter family events as needed, or to change their commitment and level of involvement in events.

- **Use your social support network and resources in your community.** Be with friends and family, who will act as a source of support, assistance and comfort. Enlist the help of others for support or assistance in errands and everyday functions in the days prior to and following the anniversary. You may also need some help with child care if your children do not attend a memorial service.

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