

In the Aftermath of Terrorism

The Anniversary of September 11th: School Administrators' Guide for Talking to their Students and Staff

As we approach the one-year anniversary of September 11, 2001, many children and adults are still having significant reactions. Throughout the year there have also been frequent reminders of the possibility of further attacks on our country, which may add to children's sense of further danger and emotional distress. The enormity of what occurred on September 11th will be reflected in the extensive attention paid, across the country, to this first anniversary. In addition to private memorials, there will be many highly publicized reminders of the events that may increase the reactions of students, parents, teachers and school staff.

September 11th is, for many school systems, less than a week after the start of the next school year. It is therefore important that planning for the anniversary begin as soon as possible. Many school systems will be planning formal or informal memorial activities to mark the anniversary. As school administrators, you will be required to make decisions on how to mark the anniversary of 9/11 in your schools and community. These guidelines will help you and your schools think about how to prepare for the one-year anniversary and provide specific advice on to address this topic sensitively within the school setting.

While looking through these guidelines, it is important to keep in mind:

- Memorial activities can further the process of healing and learning.
- The planning process is as important as the memorial activities themselves.
- Teachers, parents, and students will benefit from the planning process.
- Symptoms and reactions vary from child to child.
- There is no one "best way" to acknowledge the anniversary of 9/11.
- Helping children deal with a difficult event is hard work - school staff will need to be sure to take care of themselves.

What should we expect to see in our students during the anniversary of 9/11?

- At the time of the anniversary, children frequently experience a recurrence of some of the feelings associated with a loss or tragedy.
- Reactions of children and adults may vary widely.
- Some children who not directly impacted by the events of 9/11 may not be interested in revisiting the events. For many of these children, it may be appropriate that their lives are occupied with the typical concerns of childhood.

- It is important to find ways within the school to recognize the anniversary of such an important event without imposing personal emotions or expectations on either students or staff.

- Some children who were most directly affected by the terrorist attacks may appear to be "back to normal" but may still be feeling sad, scared, anxious or angry.

- Children do not always demonstrate their feelings directly and we should pay special attention to signs of concern or distress.

- Children who are known to have histories or ongoing exposure to trauma or loss, even if they are not directly related to the events of 9/11, may be especially vulnerable in the days and weeks surrounding the anniversary.

- Heightened media coverage and publicity of memorial events may increase reactions in children, and parents should monitor and supervise their television watching, and especially for younger children, consider limiting the amount of television exposure.

- Some signs of distress to look for include the sudden appearance or noticeable change of:

- Depressed or irritable mood
- Oppositional and defiant attitude
- Attentional or other behavioral problems
- Difficulties with classmates and peer group
- Social isolation or withdrawal
- Dramatic changes in academic performance
- Physical complaints
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances

The extent and nature of these potential difficulties may be related to many factors, including:

- Age and developmental level
- Personal history (e.g., prior trauma, loss, or emotional difficulties)
- Support from peers, parents, and school staff

A crisis can uncover feelings related to other current or past troubling events that were not fully resolved, many of which will not be directly related to the crisis at hand. Whether or not these signs and symptoms are in direct response to the events of September 11th, when they persist or interfere with the child's daily life, children may be in need of additional support or intervention.

What is memorialization and how can it help?

- Memorialization is any activity designed to help us formally mark the anniversary or memory of a significant event. In this instance, we are memorializing our losses resulting from the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.
- Memorial events can help children express and cope with their feelings that might otherwise seem overwhelming to deal with alone.
- By actively planning and taking part in a memorial event as part of the school community, children can exercise some control over how they will remember the disturbing events.
- Children may have similar needs as adults in times of crisis, but they often meet those needs in very different ways. It is important to find out from the students what they would like to remember and what would be the best way to acknowledge the anniversary.
- Children need to be part of the planning of memorial events. A memorial planned by adults for children is likely to be more helpful to the adults and not necessarily meet the children's needs.
- The planning of a memorial activity can be more therapeutic than participating in the event.
- Different groups of children and adults will have different needs and wishes at the time of the anniversary.
- Memorial activities do not need to be formal or elaborate.
- School staff should engage students in a discussion of what they think would be a meaningful way to acknowledge the anniversary.
- Discussion allows children to explore how they are feeling, and to think about what might help them feel better.
- Peers can often provide each other with helpful ways to deal with feelings related to September 11th.

Ways of observing the anniversary of September 11th:

- There are many ways individual schools or a school district can mark the anniversary of 9/11. Some memorial events might be within the classroom, while others may be school-wide.

- It is best to take cues from children, considering their age and developmental level when planning memorial activities.

- Some children may wish to acknowledge the anniversary in a personally meaningful way (e.g., drawing a picture, writing a poem or essay), but resist a group activity centered around the anniversary.

- Some children may prefer not to mark the anniversary with any formal or even informal activity.

- While it is important to solicit suggestions from your students, it may also be helpful to offer a series of options for children to consider including:

Holding a discussion about their ideas and feelings about what the anniversary means to each of them.

Planning a display of students' artwork relating to the anniversary.

Writing and reading essays that describe the most helpful ways of dealing with feelings about September 11th.

Observing a moment of silence.

- Discussion of community assets, strengths and values can be very important in helping to foster children's hope for the future as they think about September 11th.

- Some schools may choose to honor the anniversary by conducting classroom or school-wide "pro-social" activities that aim to:

Promote tolerance for cultural and ethnic diversity.

Address how to resolve conflict in non-destructive ways.

Help children think about how their own volunteer services can strengthen their communities.

- Such activities may occur in concert with memorial activities while in some schools they may be the primary focus of activities on the anniversary.
- It is important to remember that those children who are grieving their own personal losses may resent or feel frustrated if the memorial event only focuses on the heroic efforts of rescue workers.

How do you go about planning a memorial in school?

- Memorial activities can be planned at various levels including in individual classrooms, in small student groups, in larger school-wide committees or even district-wide efforts.
- The best place to begin is by initiating conversations with students in groups, such as with classrooms, during activities, or in after school groups.
- It is important to involve students in the planning process, but equally as important for us as adults to provide guidance, structure and support to children.
- Consider the children's ages and developmental levels when planning activities.
- Some schools may have been more directly impacted than others and this will affect the planning process.
- Some schools may wish to involve each teacher and every classroom, while other schools may wish to use volunteers or create a planning committee.
- If you have a School Crisis Response Team you can use them as a resource when planning the events.
- Coordinate the planned events in the classroom with other events in the school and broader community.
- Not all children will want to be involved in the planning process and participation should not be mandatory.
- Don't feel pressured to plan the "perfect event". Any memorial event or activity, big or small, can be a helpful means for children to understand and mark the anniversary of our national tragedy of 9/11.

How can teachers and school staff handle this sensitively?

Activities within a school or individual classroom may impact other students and staff within the school as well as children's families at home. You should therefore inform parents, classroom teachers and the entire school community

about plans for memorial events within your school. Given the wide scope of impact of the events of September 11th, schools should attempt to coordinate memorial planning and activities school-wide, as well as community-wide.

- Classroom teachers will benefit from additional support and guidance on how to mark the anniversary in a sensitive manner.

- It may be helpful to have a meeting of school personnel to discuss the upcoming anniversary and ideas and plans for marking the anniversary.

- Ideally, parents and caregivers should be informed prior to planning any memorial events.

- Awareness of school activities and plans can often help to initiate discussions at home where children may be most comfortable talking about September 11th and this first anniversary

- Parents should be invited to share any concerns or relevant family experiences with school personnel related to the anniversary of September 11th including:

- Direct impact of the terrorist attacks on family and friends.
- Earlier or recent trauma or losses
- Involvement of family members in high-risk professions (e.g., military, police, firefighters, EMS)

- School personnel should keep the lines of communication open with parents throughout the planning process.

- Parents should be encouraged to continue to discuss the planned activities with their children at home.

- Open discussion communicates to children that adults are available for further discussion and support.

- Any discussions that teachers have with children in the classroom should be conducted as if there were students who were directly impacted by the events of 9/11, even if you are not aware of any-some children and families may choose to keep their losses private.

- Teachers and school staff should look for signs of distress in students, such as agitation, acting-out, or other unexpected behaviors.

- Alternative plans should be available for children who may have difficulty participating in memorial events.

If you are aware of any children within your school who have suffered personal losses related to 9/11 it is important to have a trusted teacher, counselor or school administrator talk to them and their caregivers prior to the start of any planned memorial activities. They should be informed that there will be a discussion regarding the events of 9/11 at school and reassured that no one will disclose their personal experiences and that there is no obligation for them to share their personal experiences or feelings. In some instances, families may not wish to have their children participate in memorial activities. We need to remember that many children and their families choose not to disclose personal losses and make our best efforts to respect their privacy.

What if teachers and staff find this work difficult?

- As school administrators, it is important to know the strengths and limitations of your school's staff.
- Some teachers and staff may find it difficult to discuss the events of 9/11, especially if they are dealing with their own losses.
- This is difficult work for all of us and it is important for you and your staff to think about what your own feelings are in relation to the events.
- Remember that children look to us, as adults, for guidance and support during difficult times. We need to think about how our own reactions may impact the children.
- Providing an opportunity for faculty and staff to talk about their own reactions prior to talking with students may be useful to them personally and may better prepare them to meet the children's needs.
- Children's questions may sometimes take us off guard and make us confront issues we would rather not think about.
- Adults should seek out support from other adults and colleagues when needed.
- Having a plan to address these concerns in advance will help make the task easier.
- If the task seems to some of your teachers or school staff, they can share the responsibility with a colleague, or invite someone else into their classroom to conduct discussions with the students.

Where can I find additional information?

These guidelines represent some initial points to consider in planning for the September 11th anniversary. If you have additional concerns please contact a trusted medical or mental health professional in your community. You may also obtain additional information on the impact of violence and trauma on children on the website of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at www.nccev.org.