

Talking to Kids About Disaster ... One Year Later

We published this article last year, with the events of September 11th. Since then, America has waged war in Afghanistan. We've dealt with continued warnings of new terrorism here in this country while learning about continuing terrorist attacks in other countries through the media.

As the anniversary of this day arrives, it's important to remember how to talk with our children about these tragic events. Children may ask again, why? Why did those people do that? Why don't they like us?

We also need to be prepared to answer questions that have to do with anniversaries and remembrances. Why do we commemorate the trauma and loss?

Remember to consider your child's age and his or her temperament before you respond.

Preschool children tend to regress when faced with fears, behaving in dependent ways and clinging to adults. Often, they feel powerless and, as the stress of the anniversary events increases, they may start to show signs of withdrawal. Children may sleep or stay quiet. Adults may see problems eating and inability to play normally.

School age children strive to understand their fears. They may ask a lot of questions, then fall silent, trying to digest the information adults give them. Teen aged youngsters may offer strong opinions about right and wrong in the situation. This helps them cope emotionally. All children may express deep-felt emotions of fear or anger.

For parents of young children, wait for questions before providing information. Keep your answers simple and be honest about what you know or don't know. Even young children sense the stress and worry that adults feel. Remember that young children express themselves through play. Your child may once again "bomb buildings" or "play war" as a way of resolving his or her emotions.

Parents of older children should answer questions in a simple, honest way. Rather than give your child a lot of details, keep your explanations brief, then ask your child what s/he thinks. Give older children a chance to talk about their thoughts and feelings. If you put together a scrap book or a log of the events as they unfolded, this may be the time to close that scrapbook with clippings about anniversary events. Having this tangible journal may help a child feel less anxious.

School aged children can understand the explanation that we commemorate these events to mark their impact on us. Remembering is part of the healing process for most of us. In some cases, this anniversary may bring up some delayed traumatic stress in your child.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry gives a list of signs of severe stress in children. During the increased media attention about September 11th anniversary events, watch your children for:

- Refusing to go to school
- Clinging to parents
- Talking about fears that don't seem to go away after a couple of days, including worry about being separated from parents
- Sleeping difficulties, including nightmares, bedwetting, and screaming while asleep
- Concentrating less than usual
- Acting irritable
- Acting jumpy or startling easily
- Complaining about stomachaches, headaches, dizziness, or other physical problem and no physical cause can be found
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Acting sad, listless, passive
- Ongoing preoccupation with the disaster

Children with any of these signs may need to see a professional with experience in helping children suffering from stress after a traumatic event.