



## The New School Year and September 11th Helping Children Navigate the Words and Images of 9/11

**Donna Gaffney, DNSc, PMHCNS-BC, FAAN  
Advisory Board, Families of September 11**

It is summer and “9/11” families begin to fill with anxiety. This year we are all beginning to get anxious. It is the ten-year anniversary of September 11th, or 9/11, the numeric shorthand that has forever labeled this horrific day in our history. The school year begins after Labor Day and a few days later it is September 11th. The media is already sending out reminders of the trauma and loss associated with this painful day. Families who have been directly and most intimately affected by the terrorist attacks, those who have lost someone close to them, have the greatest difficulty preparing for and surviving the months ahead. We had a brief preview of what we will experience this fall when Osama bin Laden was killed in May. How should we talk about these issues with children? What about those who are too young or not even born in 2001? How do we control and monitor media consumption? How can we help children feel safe?

Here are some recommendations for families and schools as they struggle with these questions.

*First, it is important for parents and family members to take the lead and provide the “insulation” that affords children the protections and tools they need as they experience September 11 in the world outside of their homes, and that includes classrooms, school buses and even on the playground.*

Most importantly, talk about the events of 9/11 and how it affected your family. Tell the story of that day . . . every year. Do not think that your child “knows” the story already. Remember that a child, who was 5 years old in 2001, did not understand death, loss and separation or the magnitude of the event itself. As that child grows he or she is ready to learn the story again, and this time from a different perspective, as a grade-schooler, a middle schooler, a high schooler and a college student. There will be different questions each year and an opportunity for families to clarify and re-explain as needed.

Families should talk about the media and how it affects people. Children and their families need to know how they can inoculate themselves from media images and words that are intrusive and inappropriate. Such strategies might include: avoid news on TV or radio for the week before 9/11 or watch the news together, talk about it or write a letter to the newspaper.

Talk to children's teachers; discuss your concerns, ask the teachers to be sensitive to discussion in the classroom and the use of any visual materials discussing 9/11 (this means no graphic images etc).

For those children and teens directly affected, explain that while their loss is so very personal, there are 1000's of other children who also lost a parent on that day. They are not alone. This is not meant to minimize their loss in any way, but to let them know that there are other young people who are having the same feelings they are.

Discuss with children and teens that some people have very personal losses, there are many others who also experienced September 11, it was a world-wide tragic event that affected millions of people- some were injured, some were family members, some worked at the buildings, some lived near the buildings, some lived in NJ, some in other states in the US, and others outside the US, in 60+ countries throughout the world. (Think of the metaphor of a stone dropping into a pond with ever widening circular ripples-- in the center is the deepest ripple, the people most affected by September 11 [husbands, wives, children, parents, siblings], as the circular ripples extend outward, they diminish in strength but are they are there none the less).

If after much consideration, parents may choose to keep their children home for the day(s). However, if that is a choice one makes, plan to do something meaningful honoring the person(s) who died on September 11th. For older children and teens, ask how they feel about going to school on September 11th, what would make it easier for them? What could they do to honor their loved one? Could they share their experience with others, either on a one-to-one or in a small group?

Use metaphors...Think of a child with a peanut allergy. It can have catastrophic effects if a child tastes or touches a peanut. Yes, the schools can remove the potentially harmful allergens from the environment in terms of not serving it in cafeterias and snack machines but it is impossible to ask every child and teacher in the school to stop eating peanuts/peanut butter, products made with peanuts and products made with equipment that has peanut oils on it. Not only is it unreasonable but impossible as well. How can you control for everything that another child may bring into the school environment? As any parent of a child with a peanut allergy knows, education is the best prevention of potentially disastrous allergic responses. The same holds true for children who were touched by the events of September 11. Messages, images, words are everywhere, we cannot purge the media and the environment of all 9/11 related "allergens." But children can be prepared for future exposure to 9/11 words and images, both for the immediate and in the distant future . . .for that time when he or she is a new college freshman, and a room-mate asks, "How did your father die?" or a classmate, far removed from the New York metro area, casually says, "9/11, I don't even remember it." A family who tries to prevent their children from hearing or seeing anything about September 11th will have no better success than the parent who manages a peanut allergy by demanding an environment free of the allergen. The child will be fearful and feel unsafe.

Finally, it is unrealistic and inappropriate to ask schools to remove all reminders of 9/11, or forbid discussion or presentations about it in the classroom. If we do nothing, do not talk about the event itself and its consequences, if we do not honor those who lost their lives and those who volunteered to help the victims, many of our children will not understand the significance of 9/11 to this nation or appreciate the power and historic lessons that came from it. Far worse is the possibility that they may only learn what the terrorists hope they'll learn; to promote fear by focusing on the death and destruction that terrorists created. Teachers and schools are urged to use the tremendous resources available to them regarding "how" to teach the events of 9/11 in a sensitive, meaningful way. With these tools, future generations will be able to appreciate and respect the importance of September 11th in our history and realize that even in the face of so much hate and pain, many people responded to 9/11 with courage, selflessness and goodness to others.