

9/11 MEMORIAL

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Mural created by the Lower School Art Students of Porter Gaud School in Charleston, South Carolina in Laura Orvin's Art Class for the people of New York. Gift of Lawrence Knafo.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT 9/11

Every year, the attacks of 9/11 recede further into the past. However, for those of us who lost someone close or otherwise experienced that day — whether in person or on television — thinking and talking about 9/11 may still evoke strong emotions that transport us back to the tragedy and can jar emotions long forgotten. Current events, such as the death of Osama bin Laden, can do the same. Many others will have little or no recollection of the event itself, understanding its details and ramifications through the lens of a somewhat impersonal history and through media coverage of the event.

Between managing these difficult emotions and conveying the details of such a tragic event, discussing 9/11 isn't an easy task. We often hear, *"I want to tell my child what happened that day but don't know where to begin."* The following tips, then, have been prepared to provide broad guidelines to help you in these conversations.

Information about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath can be found on our website: www.911memorial.org. For more in-depth resources for talking to your children, visit the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis or the National Association for School Psychologists at www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety.

Listen. Some children will want to talk about the attacks and some won't. Both reactions are common. If they do want to talk, it's important to offer children a safe space to share their memories, beliefs, and questions. Actively listen to their thoughts, attend to their body language, validate their emotions, and encourage respectful conversation and discussions. If they don't feel like talking, don't force the discussions. Continue to check in and let them know you are ready to listen whenever they're ready to talk.

Don't avoid difficult conversations. Parents and caregivers understandably don't want to cause anxiety and distress in their children. This often results in shying away from difficult conversations that we presume will provoke these emotions. It is the attacks themselves, though, that are upsetting, not the conversations about them. Invite the conversation with open-ended questions such as: *"What would you like to know about 9/11?"* or *"Why do you think we are remembering the anniversary of 9/11?"* Let the child's interests and thoughts guide the conversation. Use age-appropriate language and be aware of your tone, reassuring children about their own safety and allowing them to express concerns about 9/11 and its aftermath in more depth.

Answer questions about the attacks with facts. As the years have passed since 9/11, our collective memory has slowly hardened into history. This passage of time means that your children might have no direct memory of the attacks of 9/11. Their understanding comes from the myriad sources around them — their families, schools, friends, and media — and as is often the case with so many voices, these sources can sometimes contradict each other. It is important, then, to answer children's questions about what happened with basic facts and point them to reliable sources of information for further research. Be prepared for your child to ask questions about death when discussing 9/11, and to answer these questions in a way that is honest and developmentally-appropriate. To access the New York Life's useful *Grief Guide*, visit: www.newyorklife.com/foundation and click "Bereavement Resources."

Acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. It's all right not to know the answer to every question. 9/11 is an incredibly complex subject, with repercussions that are still evolving today. If you can't answer your child's question, be honest. Use the opportunity to model yourself as a learner, and explore the question together.

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Be specific. It can be easy to make generalizations when discussing 9/11. As with many tragedies, some have a tendency to talk in broad strokes; for example, comparing the suffering of one person to another or assigning blame to an entire group. The story of 9/11 is actually thousands of individual stories. Highlight those specific stories to help humanize the events, and avoid stereotypes and simplifications.

Emotions vary. Children's responses to the anniversary of 9/11 will vary widely depending on their age, personality, actual or perceived ethnic or religious background, connection to the attacks, and exposure to other past traumatic experiences. As the anniversary approaches, look for changes in mood, behavior, and daily habits, and remember that children who have experienced trauma, even if unrelated to 9/11, are at a higher risk of experiencing distress. Unhealthy behaviors, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and bullying, are unhealthy, no matter the circumstances, and warrant professional attention.

Monitor the TV and internet. Around the anniversary of 9/11, it is likely that television programs and news shows will discuss the attacks and their aftermath in some depth. Programs may include footage from 9/11 itself, and include scenes that are not appropriate for children to view at all or without supervision. Similarly, children may use the internet to seek out answers to their questions. Be actively involved in the quality and amount of information they receive.

Know yourself. You aren't immune to the emotions sparked by 9/11. Acknowledge and attend to your own reactions and feelings, your memories and connections. 9/11 is not an easy topic to think about, let alone discuss with a child. Recognizing your feelings beforehand and then sharing them honestly with your children offers them a model in their own difficult conversations and will help engender a safe, trusting environment. Seek assistance if the anniversary of 9/11 evokes feelings in you that are overwhelming or difficult to manage.

Emphasize hope. The attacks of 9/11 showed us the worst in people. But it was also a time when many wonderful, compassionate, and heroic deeds occurred. "Heroes" were everywhere on 9/11 and in the days afterwards. The shock and the sadness also brought people — families, friends, and strangers alike — together in a way that felt special. It is important to remind your children that we are also remembering those heroes and those times. Help your children recognize how their own compassion can prevent future acts of intolerance and violence by reminding them to express their ideas respectfully and to treat people who are different from themselves with kindness.



"Untitled" by Matthew Sussman. Gift of NYU Child Study Center.

Suggested resources

National September 11 Memorial & Museum:
www.911memorial.org

National Association for School Psychologists:
www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement:
www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis

New York Life Grief Guide:
www.newyorklife.com/foundation
(click "Bereavement Resources")

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