

Talking with Children and Teenagers About the Anniversary of 9/11/2001



Think About What Children and Teens are Seeing and Hearing

In general, children and teenagers are exposed to current news via newspapers, radio, the internet, television, or classroom discussions. Often parents are not fully aware of what information their children is receiving and will want to routinely generate discussions to share information and concerns. When there are major news stories or troubling events that strike closer to home, children often receive their information by overhearing adult conversations. Although children and teens naturally turn to their parents with questions about what they have seen and heard, sometimes when something is upsetting or confusing, they may be too worried to ask questions or they may turn to peers for their information. They will benefit from a parent or other caring adult taking the lead in starting a direct conversation to explain the events or to uncover any unspoken worries. For any child whose family was more directly affected by the tragedies of 9/11 or who has a family member who has served in the military since 9/11 there may be specific worries or feelings aroused by the anniversary events. When there have been personal experiences for a child or teen, these worries are likely to increase. Parents and other loving family members face special challenges at these times to listen, ask questions, try to understand the child's worries, and to answer a child or teen's questions in a manner that is both honest and reassuring. Meeting this challenge successfully strengthens a child's inner strength, sense of security, and trust.

How to Help Your Child or Teenager

Start by checking in with your child. Find out what he or she has been hearing, seeing and thinking about the remembrance of 9/11 or whether it has not yet come to his or her attention. If the adults at home are talking about this, it is likely a child will know something or sense something is going on even when the conversations have not occurred within earshot of the child. Teenagers, too, will be tuned into the conversations and the mood at home, but they have more access to other sources of information such as the internet or may be hearing things at school, in and out of the classroom.

Questions such as, "What have you heard about _____?" or "Did you hear me talking to ____ about _____?" are good ways to open a conversation.

If your child is younger and is not aware of the news, you may elect to go no further with this conversation. If your child has heard about the recent event, encourage him or her to tell you about what they've heard or what they think about what others are saying. Ask if they have any specific worries. To answer questions and lessen fears, it is important to really understand what your child is struggling with before you move to answer or reassure him or her.



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Images of war, accidents or natural disasters and those from 9/11 can be upsetting. Turn off the TV around young children or those who may have been upset by TV news in the past. Be mindful that coverage of the same upsetting event over and over again can be misinterpreted as something that is happening repeatedly. During this anniversary time for 9/11, it may seem as if the events of a decade ago are happening now. Watch television with older children so you can answer questions and be aware of their feelings. Some older children need to be reminded that the TV images can be overwhelming and that it's OK not to watch. This is true for many adults, who may feel better listening to radio reports or reading newspaper coverage rather than watching disturbing TV images.

Make the most of family time. Spend extra time with your child. Turn off the telephone and the TV during meals so you can talk together. Often parents can identify times in the day or activities that facilitate thoughtful conversations. Sometimes, it is while driving in the car or when a child sits with a parent who is working in the kitchen. Those are great times to check in with your child and talk. It can be helpful to remind a child not to worry alone. Encourage each child to share concerns with a parent. An older child or teen may respond to the idea that if they share their real worries with a parent, the parent can work together with the teen to come up with a helpful plan. In contrast, when they do not share their worries, parents are left to guess and often make unhelpful plans or suggestions.

Adults need time to talk about their worries with each other, too. Find private times when the adults can connect and share their experiences and concerns without children listening in. It is easier for a parent to be a good listener with his or her children, when their own worries can be safely expressed and shared with others separately.

Finally, when a child feels the world in general is a little less safe, regular routine and daily schedules are especially reassuring. There is great comfort in a predictable day and one in which a child knows which caring adults will be with them and what the activities of the day will include. Another way to help children and teenagers feel a little safer is to underscore the active things we do regularly to increase our own personal safety. These may include wearing seat belts or bike helmets, eating healthy foods and exercising, looking both ways before crossing the street and identifying who the supervising adults are in different settings so a child knows who to go to for help.

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