



## Helping Children Cope with 9/11 Concerns

### Introduction

The Children's Aid Society recognizes that many children, teens and adults are still trying to make sense of what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>. It has been an emotional and difficult year for everyone. It is with this in mind that we present the following material to help us cope with and be better prepared to support our families and ourselves.

It is critical to recognize that children react to stressful events differently than adults. Children's responses are often delayed and may be difficult to detect. They may find it hard to talk about how they've been affected by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Children may or may not verbally relay difficulties in coping with the memories of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Some children will exhibit little or no change in emotion or behavior. Others will re-experience feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or grief, similar to those felt a year ago. Related symptoms may include: fears of separation from parents/caregivers, sleep disturbances and nightmares, changes in eating habits, disruptive behavior (including new and unusual behavioral problems), reduced concentration, heightened irritability or sensibility, and withdrawal. In most cases, symptoms will subside with your reassurance and support.

### Helping Children Cope

It is important to note that children at various stages of development are likely to react in different ways. Parents, teachers and other caring adults are in the best position to notice and address these changes in individual children. Effective and age-appropriate ways to help children who are experiencing the above trauma-related feelings and behaviors include:

#### For children under age 5:

- Keep to normal routines and favorite rituals as much as possible.

- Monitor children's TV viewing. Limit exposure to TV programs and adult conversations about the events.
- If children seem anxious, assure them that you and they will be okay and ask what would make them feel better.
- Give plenty of hugs and physical reassurance, especially at bedtime.
- Set aside quiet times when you can listen and talk to them.
- Be guided by your child. If the topic does not come up, or if your child doesn't show interest, don't force a conversation.
- Provide opportunities for them to express themselves creatively, i.e., crafts or art projects, helping with dinner planning or preparation, etc.
- Be mindful of how issues are discussed with and near children. Explain, in a way that younger children can understand, that prejudice and violence should not be encouraged as a way to solve problems.

**For Elementary School-Age Children, the above applies, plus:**

- Don't be afraid to ask them directly what's on their minds and answer their questions honestly.
- Be sure to talk to them about the news and any adult conversations that they've heard as well as issues that they're concerned about.
- Make sure they have opportunities to talk and play with peers, to be part of the normal, joyful activities of being a child.
- If children seem anxious or worried, ask what would help them feel safe.
- Explain concrete ways that children can make the world a better place – by befriending other children who may be different than they are, helping an older person in their building or neighborhood, etc.

**For Middle School Children, the above applies, plus:**

(Note: Children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They may be prone to exaggeration. Jokes or humor can mask fears for this age group.)

- Working parents may want to make arrangements so that the child is not alone after school on the anniversary day and/or those days surrounding the anniversary.

- Answer any questions your child may have. Listen to your child's comments and determine whether he or she is interested in a conversation.
- Acknowledge any feelings of fear, horror, and anger.
- Provide comfort and reassurance.
- Children this age will be more interested in details. Share what you know but don't overwhelm them.
- Some children may act out scary feelings or may become more withdrawn. Talk with them and ask them to tell you about their feelings.
- Use historical examples (e.g. Pearl Harbor, Challenger Space Shuttle, etc.) to explain that bad things can happen to innocent people, but as people and as a nation we go on with our lives and resolve bad situations.

**For High School Teenagers, the above applies, plus:**

(Note: Youngsters in high school have probably already talked about the attacks with friends. It is important to be honest with them and let them know what is going on. Teenagers may become glued to TV, eager for news and details).

- Acknowledge your teen's emotions about 9/11 and let him/her know that you are available to talk to them at anytime.
- Some teens may block out the whole thing and refuse to acknowledge that anything big has happened or that they care. This often masks real fears and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Teens can sometimes be difficult to engage in conversation. Casual questions or comments about a parent's own feelings may be helpful in opening up a discussion – although keep in mind that a teen may not react immediately.
- Some teens may make jokes. Let them know if you don't find it funny without dismissing their point of view.
- Some teens may be very interested in discussing issues that this tragedy raises. Be willing to engage them in serious discussions.
- Be careful to avoid placing blame on a whole group of people or targeting particular groups.
- Encourage volunteerism and community or neighborhood projects.

## **Children Who May React Strongly**

Some children are more likely to have stronger emotional reactions than others to the memories of 9/11. Children who are likely to experience strong emotions include:

- Children who witnessed the attacks first-hand or whose parent, relative, or friend was injured or killed.
- Children who were displaced from their homes or their schools as a direct result of 9/11.
- Children who have a past history of emotional problems.
- Children who have a past history of trauma, either as a victim or a witness to violence or abuse.
- Children whose caregiver(s) are having particular difficulty coping with the disaster and/or other personal issues, making it difficult for them to provide an environment in which the child feels emotionally and physically safe.

**Note:** Foster children are particularly vulnerable to a reactivation of trauma-related emotions, as a large number of them have experienced many of the above risk factors prior to being placed in foster care.

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Sources: In addition to its own materials, The Children's Aid Society utilized the following when compiling this guide:

1. "Talking with Victims when Disaster Strikes" - by David Walsh, Ph.D.
2. "One Year Later: Remembering September 11, 2001 - Tips for Parents," "One Year Later: Remembering September 11, 2001 - Tips for Students," and "One Year Later: Remembering September 11, 2001 - Tips for Teachers" by The American Red Cross and The National Association of School Psychologists.