

20 Years After the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks: GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATORS

The 20-year mark of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is a milestone for the nation. We can expect substantial media attention and an array of commemorative activities as the world looks back on these events. Though remembrances will have an impact on almost all of us, they will affect us differently depending in part on our age and experiences.

Educators can play a vital role in helping students comprehend the 9/11 attacks in ways that promote understanding without provoking undue stress. The most helpful message will be that whatever we face, we will face together, using coping skills we have learned. Our current experience of educational, social and emotional upheaval as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic can provide a useful example.

Thinking and planning ahead can help educators take care of themselves, support students, and strengthen families' ability to respond to their children's questions and concerns.

IMPACTS ON EVERYONE

- » **Extensive media coverage and graphic reminders of the events.** We will see disturbing imagery and hear emotional stories, including visuals and audio of ground zero as the attacks unfolded. We can expect frequent repetition of the most disturbing content.
- » **Troubling new information.** We may hear deeper background on what happened, including failures of intelligence. We will learn more about first responders who have suffered serious illness or died as a result of rescue and cleanup—a number now estimated to exceed deaths that were a direct result of the attacks.
- » **Greater anxiety.** Graphic reminders of that tragic time and repetitive content can easily boost fears of new attacks and anxiety about the future.

IMPACTS ON EDUCATORS

- » **Painful reminders of a lived experience.** Most educators today will remember the 9/11 events. They are likely to have powerful personal stories of their fears, concerns and losses over those days.
- » **Different generational experiences.** Today's younger educators were children or teens in 2001. Older educators may have been in the classroom at the time, responsible for the wellbeing of students.
- » **Personal distress.** For many, it will be distressing to relive these events or discuss them among colleagues, with friends and family, or in classrooms.

IMPACTS ON STUDENTS

- » **It's history.** 9/11 is a historical event that occurred before their birth. It does not have the same impact that it has for those who lived through it.
- » **Disturbing graphic imagery and reporting.** Many students will be exposed to repeated graphic imagery of destruction, suffering, and death. They will probably see more detailed content about 9/11 than they have before.
- » **Awareness of adults' distress.** Students will notice distraction and distress among their educators and family members.
- » **Questions, concerns, confusion.** This is powerful information. Students of all ages are likely to have questions and concerns. They may wonder if new attacks are likely. Young students may be confused about whether the images they are seeing are current or old.
- » **Seeking deeper understanding.** Older students

may seek deeper understanding of why the attacks occurred—why would anyone do such a thing? Why wasn't it stopped? How can we protect ourselves, our families, and our nation in the future?

IMPACTS ON FAMILIES

- » **Personal anxiety and troublesome memories.** Parents, grandparents and other adult family members will be revisiting their own experiences of the events.
- » **Anxiety in children.** Parents may see greater anxiety in their children with the increased media attention to 9/11.
- » **Guidelines can help.** Parents may benefit from simple guidelines about how to best support their children (e.g., limit children's exposure to graphic media; take cues from children about how much they are ready to discuss; share personal stories but keep the focus on children's questions and concerns).

STEPS FOR EDUCATORS

- » **Start with basics.** Provide basic information in simple and direct terms. Then ask for questions.
- » **Take cues from students.** What is their developmental level? How much are they ready to hear? Do they have access to accurate information about 9/11?
- » **Expect direct and sometimes personal questions.** Think about how comfortable you are with personal disclosures (you are not required to share). While personal stories can be powerful, keep the greater focus on students' concerns and experiences. Questions you might hear:
 - *What were you doing that day?*
 - *Were you in any danger?*
 - *Did anyone you know die that day?*
 - *Why would anyone do something like this?*
 - *Is it going to happen again?*

For more detailed guidance about responding to questions, see ["Talking to Children About Terrorist Attacks"](#).

- » **Provide authentic reassurance when possible.** Look for frameworks that are likely to resonate for your students. For example, some students will appreciate knowing the government and police are concerned for their safety, while others might feel safer hearing that this is a concern of their local community.
 - "Our government, police and schools have taken steps to keep us safe and protect us, so we hope nothing like this ever happens again."
 - "Our country, and all of our allies, have people working full time to keep us all safe."

• "It's scary to think that something like this could ever have happened. Many people in our community are working all the time to protect us and keep us safe."

- » **Discuss the problems with bias and blame.** For older students (middle and high school), acknowledge that one way people gain control over uncomfortable feelings such as fear is to blame others. This can result in discrimination and violence against entire groups of people, such as a racial or religious community. Engage them in discussions about how to prevent this kind of unfair bias.
- » **Focus on social unity.** Students of all ages will benefit from activities that support coping and focus on the power of social unity during times of challenge.

COMPARISONS: KEEP THE FOCUS ON HOPE AND RESILIENCE

These are not easy matters to discuss. However, students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can provide a context for understanding the 9/11 experience. In this recent period, we have learned as a nation that a period of challenge and crisis is a time to join together, be inclusive, and support people who strive to promote recovery, growth and peace. For many of us, it has also been a time to face personal challenges we had not previously faced. Fear and loss have contributed to conflict and discrimination.

Discussion of loss in the media, community, and classroom can remind students and staff of unrelated personal losses. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a staggering number of deaths. Almost everyone has been impacted at least indirectly by these deaths. Grief associated with 9/11 may therefore elicit more sadness than in many prior years.

Educators can share inspirational stories of individuals who discovered their own resiliency and personal strengths during 9/11—survivors, first responders and their families, teachers, young people motivated to choose a life of service to their community or in the military. Compare these with some of the heroic stories we've heard over the pandemic—first responders, front line health care workers, essential workers, volunteers, families learning to adapt to new ways of working or studying. Educators may wish to introduce other examples of times when our nation faced challenges and individuals stepped up to make a difference.

These conversations can inspire students, their families and educators to identify how they, too, can contribute to recovery from crises and challenges. Such stories throughout American history speak to our resilience and strength as a nation. They can help all of us cope more effectively with our remembrance of 9/11.