



August 15, 2006

Re: The Fifth Commemoration of the Attacks of September 11, 2001

Dear Educator:

Again we approach the anniversary of the September 11 attacks and we remember the horror and the loss experienced by all just days after most of our children began a new school year, five years ago. For those of us still mourning the loss of a loved one that day, it seems like only yesterday. For many others, it may already be a day settling into its place in history, a sadness remembered from a time in the past. As years pass, determining how to remember the day or predicting what to expect in emotion may be more of a challenge than it has in the past.

Children of September 11 (COS11) is a nonprofit subsidiary organization of Families of September 11 (FOS11). We are dedicated to providing information to assist children in healing in the aftermath of a public tragedy such as 9/11. As we have since 2002, Children of September 11 has prepared information for schools and families nationwide to help them as they prepare to guide their children and students through the anniversary of a day that claimed over 3,000 lives, a day that is now known as the day that changed America. This year, we are fortunate to have been assisted in this endeavor by the newly established National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB).

The NCSCB was established in December 2005 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center with funding from the September 11th Children's Fund and the National Philanthropic Trust. The goal of the NCSCB is to promote an appreciation of the role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss **nationwide**. The NCSCB will work to link efforts to provide trauma-related and bereavement support services within school settings as well as serve as a resource for information, training materials, consultation, and technical assistance for school systems.

Dr. David Schonfeld, the Director of the NCSCB and FOS11 Advisory Board Member, has prepared helpful information for schools as administrators face the challenge of preparing for the fifth anniversary of 9/11. Our organization is pleased to be able to share this with you. Please visit the COS11 website at www.childrenofseptember11.com or call our office at (212) 575-1878 for additional information.

Sincerely,

MaryEllen Salamone
Families of September 11
FOS11 Advisory Board Member



Guidelines for Parents and Schools for the Approaching Fifth Remembrance of September 11, 2001

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, CCHMC

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As we approach the fifth year commemoration of the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, adults may have several questions about how best to support children:

- 1) Should we expect children to still be reacting to the events of September 11, 2001?
- 2) For the children who are still being affected, what will this anniversary be like for them?
- 3) How may the children who seem to be doing well be affected by this anniversary?
- 4) Should schools acknowledge the anniversary? If yes, how can we do this sensitively?

These guidelines will offer some answers and provide some advice to parents, school administrators, teachers, and other school personnel about how to support children and the school community around the time of the fifth remembrance of September 11, 2001.

Life changing events do just that.

Even though almost five years have passed since September 11, 2001, children who were impacted by the tragic events of that date are not “over it.” The resiliency typically demonstrated by most children, even in the aftermath of a major crisis event, may lead adults to conclude that the children are no longer thinking about or reacting to the crisis. The children may, in very many ways, look like they are “back to normal” – they may appear to adults around them, and even seem to themselves, that they are “o.k.” Because, overall, they may be doing well, these children, and the adults who care for them, may then be surprised when reminders of the events of that day, or how their life has changed since then, make them feel sad, anxious, or scared again. For children who may have continued to have significant difficulties since the events of September 11, 2001, the reminders may exacerbate their distress.

At the time of the anniversary of a loss or tragedy, children, just like adults, may experience a repeat of some of the feelings they had around the time of the initial loss or crisis. The actual date of September 11th has taken on such strong symbolism that it is very likely that children will have an even stronger anniversary reaction than for other crisis events – indeed, it is hard for even a very young child to forget what happened on September 11th. It is also very likely that there will be a great deal of media coverage surrounding the fifth anniversary of September 11th that will remind children further about the events. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the terrorist events throughout the world, and the continuing discussions related to homeland security may all increase children’s (and adults’) concerns about their safety.

Children may show their distress in many ways and have different needs.

Children may appear depressed or irritable, have difficulty sleeping or eating, or demonstrate academic or behavioral problems. Children who were directly impacted by the events of September 11th, especially those who suffered losses or who directly witnessed the events or its aftermath or had family members that did, are certainly more likely to have ongoing adjustment problems and/or more anxiety and distress surrounding the anniversary. Furthermore, children who had episodes of loss or trauma that preceded or followed September 11, 2001 are also at higher risk -- *even if these losses or traumatic experiences are unrelated to the events of September 11th.*

Children and adults may have very different needs around the time of the anniversary and hold very different opinions about how best to acknowledge the anniversary – indeed; there is no one best way to mark the anniversary. Children who experienced a personal loss may prefer to honor the day alone or in the company of close family or friends, or may instead want to honor their loved ones through a public event or activity. Children who had a family member die on September 11th may resent a focus on the heroic efforts of rescue workers. Children who have experienced the death of a family member or friend from an unrelated cause may resent all the attention paid to losses associated with September 11th. Some children who were not directly impacted by the events of September 11th may simply not be interested in focusing a great deal of attention on acknowledging the anniversary; it is important that we not impose on these children's emotional responses. With all of these potential different feelings associated with how to mark the anniversary, some schools may be tempted to ignore the anniversary altogether.

Teaching children in school about important and relevant events is the best way to demonstrate that education, and schools, are important and relevant.

Children and their parents depend on schools to help children understand and deal with important events in their lives and communities. If we avoid dealing with important issues in schools or imply to children that we do not think they are capable of discussing difficult topics or that it is inappropriate to talk about these events and their associated feelings, we risk children seeing schools as irrelevant to their personal lives and unable to deal with difficult issues. We risk teaching them that these events and the many lives impacted by these events are unimportant or inappropriate to discuss. We risk implying that there is something wrong with them that they are unable to deal with such events and the associated feelings.

Memorial and commemorative events instead give children an opportunity to express and cope with difficult feelings, to realize that they are not alone in having fears and concerns, and to draw on the support of a caring community. Events that would otherwise be very difficult to deal with alone become more tolerable because of the support provided by peers and caring adults. Children have the opportunity to learn from others how to cope with troubling feelings and the chance to share their coping techniques. Children can learn tolerance and respect for others and gain an awareness that everyone has a different timetable for how they cope with the events; all are to be acknowledged. As a group, they increase their understanding and acceptance of the events.



A memorial or commemorative event planned by adults for children is more likely to be helpful to the adults.

It is usually more helpful in furthering coping and in building resilience when we are part of the process of planning the memorial or commemorative event than when we are only participants. Therefore, adults should avoid the temptation to tell children what they should be feeling or how they should express those feelings. It is far better to ask them and then listen to their responses. By involving children in the planning process, they have an opportunity to voice within a group their feelings, come to a shared meaning of the event, and identify collectively a meaningful and helpful way to mark the anniversary. Imposing a moment of silence on children as a way to mark the passing of another year may not be appreciated by children if they feel that they have not been given the opportunity to talk about the event throughout the year.

Each school will need to decide what works best for their own students and staff and should involve students and the staff directly in the planning process. Simple and symbolic events are often far more meaningful and therefore helpful to participants than are formal or involved commemorative activities. No matter how the school community chooses to acknowledge the anniversary, those who have different needs should have their views respected – children who are uncomfortable should not be forced or even coerced to participate in particular events. Schools should also consider how they might highlight strengths of the community and foster a sense of hope for the future. For example, a school may opt to implement a unit on diversity or non-violent conflict resolution skills in conjunction with, or in place of, commemorative activities.

The timing of September 11th, on one of the first Mondays of the 2006-7 school year, may lead some schools to conclude that they do not have adequate time to prepare a thoughtful way to mark the anniversary, especially if they wish to obtain input from the students, their families, and the school staff. But while it is important to acknowledge the anniversary of September 11th on that date, it is not necessary to have a commemorative or memorial event held on that date – some schools may choose instead to start the planning process through classroom discussions at that time or plan or initiate units on diversity or violence prevention.