



School Psychology Services

My School Psychologist

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Secondary Parent Edition

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10th Anniversary of September 11, 2001: Tips for Parents

The 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks is a significant event for the United States. Most people will focus on remembering those who died, honoring those who keep the country safe, and reflecting on the country's resilience. However, some adults and children may be at risk of an "Anniversary Effect" - the experiencing or re-experiencing of strong feelings related to the attacks.

Extensive media coverage of the anniversary and memorial dedication will likely include footage of the attacks. Many children will be seeing these images for the first time. For others, this renewed focus on the tragedy can bring back the feelings they had when it occurred. This is particularly true for individuals who were personally impacted by the events. Additionally, greater attention to this frightening time for the country may contribute to an already heightened sense of anxiety related to our continued state of war, the troubled economy, and the recent rash of natural disasters.

Welcome to the 2011-12 School Year

We wish you and your child a highly successful and rewarding school year...and if a bump occurs in the road along the way, we hope we can be there to lend a helping hand.

School psychologists are mental health professionals who help children and adolescents overcome barriers to success in school, at home, and in life. We collaborate with school staff, parents, and

Parents and caregivers know their children best. Reassuring your children that they are safe and you will take care of them is most important. Also, by being aware of possible risks and reactions, you can help your children process their thoughts and feelings about the anniversary in a healthy way.

1. Be prepared for your children (and for you) to experience a surfacing of emotions. The range of reactions will vary depending on your children's personal history and connection to attacks. Many children will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior. Older children may re-experience feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or grief like those felt during the attack. Related symptoms may include disruptive behavior, reduced concentration, heightened irritability or sensitivity, and withdrawal. Usually, symptoms will subside with your reassurance and support. Keep in mind that children,



"Let's see... beef jerky, potato chips, gummy bears. That's all my major food groups."

Gary Olsen, Dubuque Schools, www.dubuque.k12.ia.us

particularly young children, look to adults for cues on how to respond to events and challenges. Your attitude and reactions will shape those of the children in your care.

2. Be aware of more severe reactions. Some children may demonstrate more intense, persistent reactions that warrant professional mental health intervention.

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other professionals to develop strategies that enhance learning environments and promote success for all students.

While we provide a range of services from consultation to counseling to assessment to training and more, we most want you to know that we are here to support you and your child. Please do not hesitate to contact your

school psychologist at any point of the school year. We will work with you and your child to find success.

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These symptoms include:

- Refusing to go to school and excessive “clinging”
- Persistent fears related to the tragedy
- Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, or bedwetting
- Physical complaints for which a physical cause cannot be found
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Sadness, listlessness, or decreased activity
- Preoccupation with the disaster

Pay particular attention to these symptoms if your children witnessed the attacks, lost a loved one, suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), have other mental health issues, and/or have experienced another traumatic event. Contact your pediatrician and/or your school psychologist or a private mental health professional.

3. Be mindful of your family circumstance. Additional stress on family life from circumstances such as financial difficulties, military deployments, mobility, health problems, or divorce can increase children’s anxiety and sense of insecurity or risk. Your reassurance is especially important in these instances.

4. Be a good listener. Take time to listen and talk to your children. Let them guide the discussion. Reassure them that it is okay to feel sad or upset when they think about an unhappy event and that it is natural to have such feelings on anniversary dates. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Your children might prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet.

5. Limit TV and exposure to negative images. The media is likely to dramatize the anniversary. Watching replays of the attacks or stories about Homeland Security, the ongoing wars, or efforts to catch the remaining terrorists can raise

your children’s anxiety levels. Also, monitor Internet and social networking activity.

6. Spend family time. Doing enjoyable activities with you reinforces your children’s sense of stability and normalcy. Try to do things together, such as eat meals, read, play sports or games, go for walks or bike rides, or watch nonviolent, nonstressful TV. Be observant and open to their questions, concerns, and/or increased signs of anxiety.

7. Maintain a normal routine but be flexible. Ensure that your children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. This is particularly important since they are also adjusting to being back at school. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don’t push them if they seem overwhelmed. Spend extra time with them at bedtime if they are having difficulty sleeping.

8. Emphasize the positive. Whether it is at school or at home, anniversary activities should center on the positive attributes of lost friends or loved ones and/or the empowering effects of the recovery process. This includes the importance of family, a stronger sense of community, increased civic activism, the desire to help others, tolerance for people’s differences, and a greater appreciation for the rights and responsibilities of American freedom.

9. Share any concerns with your children’s new teachers. This is important at any time during the school year, but particularly at the beginning when teachers have not had time to get to know their new students well. Let the teacher know if you think your children are likely to have a difficult time with the anniversary and the best way to communicate with you.

10. Remind your children to be respectful of other people’s reactions.

Find additional resources on September 11 on the School Psychology Services website at

<http://www.fcps.edu/dss/ips/psychologists/newsletters/index.htm>

Visit past newsletters to find information on topics such as helping your child transition to a new secondary school in the September 2010 newsletter for secondary parents.

Children don’t always know how to respond to classmates who seem sad, frightened, or insecure. Suggest that simple actions, like saying, “I am sorry you are sad,” will make both your child and the classmate feel better. Reiterate that teasing or bullying is never okay, that how people express their feelings is personal, and that all feelings are valid. However, encourage your children to tell an adult if a friend seems overwhelmed by their emotions or talks of hurting themselves or others.

11. Be aware of your own reactions. You may also be affected by the anniversary. Your children will look to you for guidance and will also gauge their current situation based on your reactions. Connect with family, friends, or members of your faith community, and don’t hesitate to ask for help if you need it. Take care of your own health by getting regular meals, exercise, and sleep. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.

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Making the Most Out of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences are an ideal opportunity to touch base with your child's teacher and establish a supportive and informative relationship. Effective home-school collaboration benefits students through higher grades, improved behavior, and more positive attitudes towards themselves and school. Attending your child's conference tells your son or daughter that you care about their education and that school is a priority.

Many schools have regularly scheduled conferences that take place between two and four times per year. These tend to last a limited amount of time. In addition, a parent or teacher may request a conference at any time to address concerns as they arise.

Preparing for the Parent-Teacher Conference

Assemble and review relevant materials. This might include report cards, test scores, health records, or home-school correspondences. Keep material together so that you can add to it periodically and access it for every school conference or communication.

Talk with your child. Inform your child about the purpose of the meeting (is it a regularly scheduled conference or related to a specific concern?). Assure your child that you are working with the teacher to help him or her succeed, not as a punishment. Ask your child for input regarding questions to ask or topics to address.

Learn about school policies. Check the student handbook or school website to review policies related to behavior, attendance, and dress code.

Be familiar with your child's homework. Know how your child has been performing on homework assignments. How long does it take to complete? Is it being turned in? Is your child able to complete assignments with minimal assistance?

Prepare a list of questions for the teacher. Think of your questions ahead of time so that you do not feel rushed at the meeting. If you are not able to get all questions answered in the allotted time, ask the teacher if you can continue the conversation over phone or e-mail. Some common questions: Does my child follow school rules? Is my child meeting expectations for learning and behavior? Is my child struggling in any area? What are my child's strengths? Are there materials or resources that you would recommend we review at home?

Be ready to collaborate. Information about concerns or areas for improvement are shared not to indicate that your child is bad but to discover collaborative ways to help him or her improve. At times, the message may come across as placing blame on the parent or child; this is not likely the intention. Offer to meet further to discuss the concern and work out a solution. Remember: teachers are often as afraid to deliver difficult information as parents are to hear it.

During the Conference

Listen carefully. Take notes if necessary. This is particularly helpful if one parent or caretaker is not able to attend. It also helps you remember details so that you can ask follow-up questions.

Offer your perspective. Teachers should know your child's activities or behaviors



"Visiting your classroom and sitting in for an afternoon was just an idea."

Gary Olsen, Dubuque Schools, www.dubuque.k12.ia.us

at home relevant to school issues, as well as your views on your child's strengths and needs.

Ask for positive information about your child. If the teacher does not offer it directly, then ask, "What does my child do well?" If you have them, share positive comments about and with the teacher as well. Let them know that you appreciate what he or she is doing for your child.

Ask questions. Don't hesitate to ask questions or request clarifications. Teachers may use academic or instructional language that is not familiar to parents. Ask what test scores mean and what the results mean for your child. Ask for an explanation of unfamiliar terms.

Remember this. If you are surprised by something you hear in a brief, routine conference, ask for a follow-up conversation or meeting.

Adapted from "Home School Conferences: A Guide for Parents" by Andrea Canter in Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators (NASP, 2004). The full handout is online at



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