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BY DR. JENN BERMAN



## Sept. 11: Helping Children Understand

### One Year Later, the Need to Talk to Kids About Terrorism Still Exists

It was only days after September 11<sup>th</sup> and I was at a radio station answering questions from listeners about the emotional impact of trauma and terrorism when the call came in. The woman caller, Mary, was clearly shaken. "My husband is a pilot," she told me. "My son, Jake, has been having nightmares. He saw the planes crash into the buildings on the news and now he is having nightmares about planes crashing into mountains and he is worried about his daddy. I don't know what to do."

We talked about helping her son understand that what happened was an unusual occurrence and that all planes don't crash into buildings and that his father's company, as well as his father, was taking extra precautions to make sure he would be safe. We discussed ways to help him express his feelings, since he was having a hard time doing it with words, like art and acting out his fears with his toy planes and Legos.

As we approach the anniversary of September 11, I can't help but wonder how that little boy is doing. Even one year later, most adults feel more vulnerable than we did prior to 9-11. But what about children? How will your child be affected by this powerful anniversary and what can you do to help him or her?

Until a few years ago, the only psychological studies about the impact of terrorism came from places like Israel, where

violence was chronic and citizens lived under a constant state of terrorism. It was unclear whether those were applicable to countries, like ours, where until last year terrorism was almost unheard of. But the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing brought about one of the first investigations of how terrorism affects children living in a country relatively free of terrorist attacks. Supplied with that information, we can better anticipate how to help our children.

On the anniversary, there will be extensive media coverage of the last year's events. The last

**The last thing children need to see is footage of those planes crashing into the World Trade Centers a hundred more times.**

thing children need to see is footage of those planes crashing into the World Trade Centers a hundred more times. Studies of middle school children, who had no direct personal exposure and were 100 miles from the Oklahoma City blast, found that those who had watched more television footage of the

disaster had the most psychological symptoms of distress. It is believed by some researchers that children experience what is now known as *vicarious exposure*, or being traumatized from a distance, that may be as significant as actually being there at the site of the trauma. Even years later, many of these children report trauma-related symptoms that impaired their functioning at home or at school.

As with any trauma, the anniversary of September 11 is likely to bring up memories, feel-



ings and fears. Children of all ages have one primary concern. That concern is safety, their own safety and the safety of those

### Ten Things You Can Do to Help Your Child With the Anniversary of 9-11

1. Turn off the television.
2. Reassure your children about their own safety.
3. Be observant about behavioral changes in your child.
4. Talk with your children about their thoughts, fears, and concerns.
5. Normalize their feelings.
6. Don't force children to process their feelings if are not ready.
7. Allow children who have lost someone to grieve their loss.
8. If a child does not want to participate in memorial activities, don't make them.
9. Help them to take actions that will create a feeling that they can impact the world.
10. Get help for yourself if you are having difficulty coping.

they care about. Like Jake, whose mom called the radio station, most children want to know that they and their parents are safe.

One of the most common and difficult questions to answer is, "Will this happen again?" Often, it is a parent's natural inclination to say, "Of course not!" in order to calm their child and make them feel better. But that is not a helpful or honest response, especially for older children. Usually the underlying fear is about their own safety. While kids need to feel reassured, the truth is that we don't know what will happen. It is important to let them know everything possible is being done to keep them safe.

Having discussions with your children about what happened and how they feel about it is important for the healing process. But some children don't want to talk. Very young children may be too confused or may not feel affected by the terrorist attacks. Some children may not have the words for it yet. They may act it out in play, you

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# Liberty & Justice ... For Kids

BY ALEX MILLER

George Washington chopped down a cherry tree at some tea party after the Mayflower landed and dropped off Pocahontas.

All too often, that's the kind of historic blend that forms in kids' minds after getting the basics in American history. They can name all the characters in *Harry Potter*



or members of N'Sync, but when it comes to the particulars of how our country was founded, it's a blurry picture.

A new animated series from PBS that premieres Sept. 2 aims to help children 7-12 gain a firmer grasp on American history by following the exploits of two young apprentices in Benjamin Franklin's print shop. In "Liberty's Kids," 40 episodes dust off those old stories with a new take that's a lot more fun than the textbook accounts. The series also uses the voice talents of some A-list stars, from Billy Crystal as John Adams to Dustin Hoffman as Benedict Arnold. Aaron Carter performs the title song.

Between the narrative of the half-hour shows, the producers have inserted some educational pieces that reinforce the facts as experienced by the characters. There are also some smart bits that compare yesterday to today, such as a description of how long it would take to get from Philadelphia to Boston in 1773 (15 days) to today in a car (five hours). That kind of care in relating historical events and context to today is part of should make the series a hit with kids.

Particularly welcome is the absence of too much sugar-coating. In the first episode documenting the Boston Tea Party, the main characters get into a discussion about slavery, and the contradiction inherent in "freedom-loving" patriots who also owned slaves. Freshly arrived from England on one of the tea ships, Sarah Phillips gives voice to loyalist sentiments, as she professes amazement that English subjects should defy the crown. It wasn't all "English bad, colonists good," and the series' writers take care to present the sto-

ries with some from both sides.

The Liberty's Kids series follows its characters through key events, from the Boston Tea Party in 1773 through the First Continental Congress, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War and through 1787 and the writing of the Constitution. It's a great ride, and something parents can feel good about letting kids watch.

Locally, Liberty's Kids will premiere on KCET at 10 a.m. Monday, Sept. 2. The remaining episodes will air weekdays at 4:30 p.m. More information is available online at [www.pbskids.org](http://www.pbskids.org).

## Star Power

The stars turned out to help voice Liberty's Kids. Here's a look at who'll be behind some of history's famous players:

Annette Bening	***	Abigail Adams
Warren Buffet	****	James Madison
Walter Cronkite	***	Benjamin Franklin
Billy Crystal	*****	John Adams
Michael Douglas	**	Patrick Henry
Whoopi Goldberg	**	Deborah Samson
Dustin Hoffman	**	Benedict Arnold
Liam Neeson	*****	John Paul Jones
Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf		
*****		George Rogers Clark
Arnold Schwarzenegger		
*****		Baron von Steuben
Maria Shriver	*****	Peggy Shippen
Sylvester Stallone	**	Paul Revere
Ben Stiller	*****	Thomas Jefferson
Michael York	*****	Admiral Lord Howe

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may notice changes in their behavior or, like Jake, they may have nightmares. It is important to make clear to your children that you are available to talk to when they are ready. Your kids may have an easier time talking about what their friends are saying about 9-11 than sharing their own feelings. This is still a great way for them to express their thoughts and concerns.

Children who feel the most helpless tend to have the most symptoms of post traumatic stress. According to author Daniel Goleman, "If people feel like there is something they can do in a catastrophic situation, some control they can exert, no matter how minor, they fare far better emotionally than do those who feel utterly helpless."

I believe this extends to the days, months and even years after a trauma.

Children who feel like they are able to help themselves and help others tend to recover quicker.

What can you do to help your child feel that sense of self-efficacy? After 9-11 many children raised money for the Red Cross or sent letters to children in New York. Some families created disaster plans together so that everyone would know where to go and what to do. One little girl proudly told me that it was her job to put the family cat in the carrier if her family had to leave. There is something about knowing what to do and where to go that makes people feel safer, even in the worst of circumstances.

One final thing to keep in mind: Research shows that how well a parent copes with trauma is one of the most significant predictors of how well a child recovers. Your children look to you to

## Children who feel the most helpless tend to have the most symptoms of post traumatic stress.

model how to deal with disaster. If you are having a difficult time with the upcoming anniversary, your own grieving process or fears seek help. One day, your children will thank you.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at [www.DoctorJenn.com](http://www.DoctorJenn.com).