

Joanne Austin
Area Extension Faculty
WSU Cooperative Extension
360-428-4270

HOW HAS SEPTEMBER 11 AFFECTED OUR CHILDREN?

Memories of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 create many images. Many of these may cause children to be fearful – visions of collapsing building, searches for missing bodies, and tears being shed for loved ones.

What impact has this event had on our children? What can parents do to help?

Purdue University and Kansas State University currently have studies underway to help answer these questions. The results are still preliminary, but do show some trends. Judith Myers-Walls, Extension Specialist, Purdue University offers this analysis and advice based on the data.

- The age of a child impacts their reaction to this event. Children preschool age and younger typically don't remember very much or anything about the events of September 11.
- Children who do not live close to New York or Washington, DC are not preoccupied with the attacks at this point a year later. It is not an immediate crisis for them.
- Children are confused. Some admit they are confused and others are not aware of their misunderstanding. Questions arise – Why were we attacked? Are we at war? If so, this doesn't look like the wars we study in history class. Who are the terrorists?
- For many children there are still feelings of sadness and anger. Others feel vulnerable and unsure about the future.

So what can parents and other adults do?

- **Assume children know about it, but do not assume they have a complete understanding.** Their knowledge may be confused. It's even confusing for adults.
- **Talk about it.** Not talking does not protect children. Continue talking as events continue to change and as children grow. Their level of understanding and feelings change over time. Listen to what they say so you can find out if they have misunderstood any information. Don't explain more than they are ready to hear, but answer their questions. If you don't know the answer, search together for more information.
- **Help children feel safe.** Assess your own feeling about our county and identify the things you feel your children should be aware of. Have the new security precautions helped? Is our world any safer? What people should children be cautious of? Children need realistic assurance. Parents cannot protect them from all bad things. Don't

say a disaster like this will never affect your family. Instead say “I’ll always try to keep you safe”. Explain that disasters are very unpredictable and adults are working very hard to make this a safer place to live.

- **Share your own feeling whether it is fear, anger, or frustration.**
- **Support children’s concern for people they do not know.** Children are often afraid for others as well as for themselves. Help them to develop caring and empathy.
- **Encourage the use of creative outlets to express feelings.** Use art, puppets, books, drama, and writing as ways for children to express their feelings.
- **Take action to reduce stress.** Find ways for you and your children to volunteer in your community. Make a difference.
- **Decrease the violence in your children’s world.** Evaluate television viewing, play activities, and even your own parenting behavior. Reduce the exposure your children have to violence and harsh punishment.
- **Avoid fostering hate.** Overcome your own fears and prejudices. Children need to learn how to be safe while they are also reaching out to learn about and make friends with new people.

Make conscious decisions about the world you would like your children to live in. Work together to create something good out of a tragedy.