

One Option for a Discussion of Terrorism and 9/11

The school year is filled with “teachable moments” when students can translate lessons learned into honing and perfecting their own ethics and moral compass. The anniversary of 9/11 is just one of those opportunities.

One goal to keep in mind when commemorating these kinds of events, whether terrorism, wars or other catastrophic losses, is to do more than just pay tribute. Include some kind of activity or action students can take. Empower them to see how they can use their positive attitudes to influence others as well.

One way to do this, especially with older students, could be to have a classroom discussion that is really a series of questions on the part of the teacher. These would need to be worded to be appropriate to the students' developmental capacities. With younger students, take these concepts and reduce them down to simpler terms.

The series of comments/questions could be something like this (*Teacher comments are in bold and italics*):

- ***Today is an anniversary of an event that was very important to us in the US. Who knows that that was?***
- ***What do we know about that event?***
 - If you have students in the class who lost someone in the attack or lost someone in a similar attack, it is critical to let them tell a little of their stories. It is too difficult for students to “sit” on that kind of thing and it also really personalized the event for other students.
- ***Let's take a moment to define "terrorism." What is terrorism?***
 - Perpetrated on a civilian or “innocent” population
 - Does not follow the usual structure of war (soldiers fighting for a defined purpose, usually political in nature, sometimes over territory or over philosophical differences between two ethnic or political groups).
 - Is often not sanctioned by a “legitimate” political group.
 - Can be perpetrated by a single person
 - Often against unknown people (whomever happens to be in a given building at a given moment rather than seeking out the means to impact one specific person or one specific group)
 - Not specific to any one ethnic group - terrorism can be perpetrated by people from any country or ethnic group.
 - Talk about the role of extremism and fanaticism
 - Also be sure to reinforce that, at this point, even with the horrors of 9/11, very few people in the US die of terrorism. We need to keep it in perspective so students don't feel like that is how they're going to die, or that life in the city is dangerous because they're targets. We know that, statistically, our students have much less than a one-in-a-million chance of being involved in a terrorist attack.
- ***What are some of the means of terrorism?***
 - Explosives (such as car bombs, the suicide bombers in Israel, etc.)
 - Bio-terrorism (using “germs” or diseases to make people sick or die)
- ***Next lets brainstorm the greatest number of examples of terrorism we can find***
 - Often students don't know of many, so you may need to help them come up with Oklahoma City and the Unibomber (Ted Kaczynski)

- Be sure that someone mentions the diseases we caused the Native Americans by giving them blankets
- ***What has to happen for people to come to the place of deciding to do something that hurts innocent people that they don't even know?***
 - Being rejected by others
 - Growing up in an environment of extremism of some sort (probably any sort)
 - Not having the skills to use communication to negotiate through life in a healthy way
 - What are some of the things that might have happened to Timothy McVey or Ted Kaczynski?
 - Others ideas and thoughts?
- ***What can we be thankful for, in regard to terrorism?***
 - Although television coverage makes it seem common, it really is still very rare in the US
 - Our government has worked very well at preventing further attacks.
 - Although an attack could happen again, it is likely to be in a very specific site, so most of us will still be able to do things that are helpful in the recovery
 - That we can all do some things that can help lessen the likelihood of students in the US growing up to become like Ted Kaczynski or Timothy McVey. That each one of us plays a role. You might brainstorm some of those things with older students:
 - We can stop rejecting others. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all.
 - We can encourage peers to be kind.
 - We can look for ways to include students who might be left out or in the margins
 - We can befriend someone who looks very different from us to find out what makes them tick... look for ways we're similar.
 - Other ideas?
- Now the goal is to "bring in home" for the students. ***What can we learn from this that helps us see the value in treating others with respect? What can we do right in our daily lives that just might help prevent one of our peers from becoming so very angry and mis-directed?***
 - So this is the action plan time... what do we want to do to make our school feel safer and more welcoming for everyone?
 - What can we do so students who don't feel accepted can find a place to belong?
 - How can you reinforce those behaviors that really do change school climate?