

PARENTING

Children need to deal with events

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

On Sept. 11, Diana Oravec had all 150 students assemble in the hallway outside her office at St. Patrick's School, Seneca Falls, at the end of the school day.

It was crowded, the principal recalled, but the children, in pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, were there for a momentous purpose: to pray the rosary for the victims of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C.

Over the ensuing week, the students drew pictures and wrote letters, prayers and poems about the attack, and for its victims and those who knew them or worked to rescue them. (Some of their work may be seen on facing page.) The students created a banner out of a bedsheet for the rescue workers in New York, and signed their names to it. And they collected money for disaster relief.

All these acts, similar to what went on in many other diocesan schools, were intended not only to help the Sept. 11 victims. They were also to help children possibly too young to understand complex Middle Eastern politics, but old enough to feel something of the agony of the United States embroiled in them.

"I think it's important for them to deal with their emotions, and to be aware that there are other kids involved in that," Oravec said.

Schools did their students an enormous favor by allowing them to freely express how they felt about the attacks, according to such experts as Dr. Linda Alpert-Gillis, director of child and adolescent psychology outpatient services at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester.

Alpert-Gillis served as one of the nation's experts ABC-News consulted for a Web site presentation on how to talk to children about Sept. 11 and its aftermath. "How To Talk To Children About War," is at http://abcnews.go.com/sections/living/DailyNews/WTC_childrenwar011001.html.

If Alpert-Gillis has one overall directive about talking with children on what happened, it's this: Don't tell them any more than they need to know.

Younger children, especially, she said, can't process too much information about the attacks, and would be better served by not seeing endless TV reports about war and terrorism. Smaller children, she said, can't always distinguish between live reports and repeat reports, and may think an attack is happening again and again. On that note, she said, be careful of letting young children see too many images of violent destruction, especially scenes of people being killed.

"Seeing the rubble is not going to affect kids all that much, but seeing people jump out of buildings is going to affect them."

She added that how parents react to terrorism and war is important as well in helping kids to cope with such tragedies. If Mom and Dad are too overly nervous or concerned, children may misinterpret what's happening, she said.

"Often kids will personalize that it's something that they've done," she said. "It's important to point out to the kids that it's an external event that caused this."

In particular, Alpert-Gillis said it was vital for grown-ups who have religious beliefs to pray with children and talk about their faith when discussing topics like terrorism and the massive amount of deaths surrounding the attacks.



Photo courtesy St. John the Evangelist School, Spencerport
First-graders at St. John the Evangelist School, Spencerport, wrote a letter of condolence to Mayor Rudolph Guiliani of New York City after Sept. 11.

Web sites offer information on talking to children

The Diocese of Rochester's Department of Catholic Schools and the New York Press Association provided the following Internet sites for information on helping children deal with the impact of terrorism and war:

- "Responding to the Day of Terrorism" at The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry's Web site at www.nfcym.org
- St. Mary's Press page at <http://www.smp.org/tragedy> called "Walking with Teens After the Terrorist Attacks"
- The U.S. Catholic bishops at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/comm/nationaltragedy.htm>
- The U.S. Department of Education at <http://www.ed.gov/units/september11/index.html>
- The American Association of Pediatrics at <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/disastercomm.htm>
- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at <http://www.aacap.org/publications/DisasterResponse/index.htm>

"I think people don't see children as very spiritual, but I think children have great spiritual potential, especially in extreme circumstances," she said. She added that parents need to remind their children that, despite the horrors of Sept. 11, God is still with us and was with the people hurt and killed in the attacks.

Children's spirituality seemed evident at St. John's School, Spencerport, where students observed a moment of prayerful silence for the attack's victims in the school cafeteria the week of the attacks.

"That's the first time I've ever seen the cafeteria totally silent," Linda Boone, principal, said.

Alpert-Gillis also pointed out that in the wake of the attacks, child patients at Strong asked whether there were any kids among the dead or injured. Young children may best relate to tragedies in such a way, she said, whereas adolescents may be able to discuss the wider implications for the world. In fact, she said, it's important for adolescents to discuss the Sept. 11 events in their broader context because they'll be voting citizens someday, and they need to begin thinking about such issues.

She added that parents and educators need to discuss with their children the temptation to become prejudiced against foreigners.

By encouraging children to do things for the victims of the attacks — collecting pennies, writing letters, saying prayers — parents and educators are also aiding their children to cope with the attacks, she said.

"I think it's helpful to feel helpful," she said. In fact, she noted that many adults have also found that contributing to disaster relief efforts has been a healing way of

dealing with the attacks.

Overall, Alpert-Gillis said, during this time of crisis and war, it's a good idea to regularly "check in" with your children to make sure they are coping well emotionally with what's going on.

She also said parents need to monitor their own feelings to be careful they themselves are coping well with the higher-than-normal level of anxiety in the nation right now.

"I think everyone tends to be a little irritable these days," she said, adding of children: "Reassure them you love them."

Family Events

• **Enroll now:** Hochstein Music School's Orff Schulwerk early childhood arts classes in music, creative movement; for pre-school, elementary school ages; Hochstein Music School, 50 N. Plymouth Ave., Rochester; 716/454-4596.

• **OCT. 12, 13 — Timber sports:** woodsmen teams from area colleges compete; Cumming Nature Center, 6472 Gulick Rd., Naples; Oct. 13: demos, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Oct. 14: events, 10 a.m.-noon, 1-4 p.m.; \$4 adults, \$3 seniors, \$1.50 students K-12; 716/374-6160.

• **OCT. 13, 14 — Family fun:** "Amazing Maize Maze," barbecue picnic, backyard playground; Long Acre Farms, Eddy Rd. & Gananda Pky., Macedon; 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; \$7 adults, \$4.50 children; open weekends in Oct.; 315/986-9821 or www.longacrefarms.com.

• **SUN, OCT. 14 — River Romance:** celebrates the Genesee River and gorge through activities along the river from Genesee Valley Park to Lake Ontario; Ontario Beach Park: sausage & corn feast, noon-4 p.m.; hayride and pumpkin patch activities, 1-3 p.m.; free carousel rides, 1-4 p.m.; Irish concert, "Wild Geese," 1-4 p.m.; 716/865-3320.

• **OCT. 17, 31 — Cool Kids on Campus:** Oct. 17: "International Folk Dance Party," Seymour Union, SUNY Brockport; Oct. 31: "Mexican Holiday," Fine Arts Tower Lobby, Fine Arts Bldg., Holley St., SUNY Brockport; 7 p.m., free; 716/395-5607, 716/637-3984.

• **SAT, OCT. 20 — Juggling fun:** "Jester @ Large," Helen McGraw Branch, Irondequoit Public Library, 2180 E. Ridge Rd., Irondequoit; 2 p.m., free; to register call 716/856-6060.

• **OCT. 24-26 — Concerts:** Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra; Oct. 24: Roberts Wesleyan College, 2301 Westside Dr., N. Chili; Oct. 25: Fairport High School, 1358 Ayrault Rd.; Oct. 26: Corpus Christi Church, 880 E. Main St., Rochester; all 7:30 p.m.; free; 716/454-7311.

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