



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS: 9/11 Parents Help Other Parents & Schools with Lessons Learned

The tragedy of September 11 had a special significance for the parents of the nearly 6,000 children who attended the seven public schools located in the World Trade Center impact zone. Healthy Schools Network has documented first hand accounts of the experiences of that day and its aftermath. In addition to extensive interviews, last winter a short survey was distributed to parents at PS 234, PS 89, IS 89 and PS 150, elementary and intermediate schools in Lower Manhattan.

Demonstrating the traditional support parents often give their children's schools, sixty-seven percent (67%) of 316 parent respondents said, given how sudden and how terrible the attacks were, their schools could not have done anything differently during the evacuation. Importantly, not one child was killed or seriously injured; some parents reported being unable to locate their children for 3-12 hours; almost all respondents volunteered advice.

**In Their Own Words** highlights the constructive advice of experienced parents-- thoughtfully and generously volunteered to help others. The vivid comments in the selections below are *verbatim* and stand as testimony of the desire of these parents to share their own invaluable "Lessons Learned" with the rest of the nation. The following themes emerge:

- Schools must have a viable, carefully considered emergency plan, known to parents, teachers and school personnel, ready on the first day of school.
- The emergency plan must include detailed and rehearsed evacuation procedures with several alternative destinations, a procedure for contacting parents regarding the location of their children, and a procedure that will identify who may pick-up the child if a parent is not immediately available.
- Schools must have emergency contact information for each child that will be accessible in an emergency.
- Schools must provide counseling in the aftermath of an emergency for children and the larger school community. Parents need to remain mindful of the extra support and nurturance their children will require.
- Parents and other adults in an emergency must stay calm, focused and mindful that their actions and comments will be the example that to a great extent determines the children's responses. Children will look to the adults for direction and emotional guidance.
- Public agencies must be authorized to protect children and held accountable.

We hope that we will never again experience another tragedy of this dimension, yet we recognize that schools need to be prepared for new kinds of emergencies. New York State requires schools to have emergency management plans.

## **SURVEY QUESTION:**

**"What did you learn that will help parents or schools in other cities/states in case of an attack where they live?"**

*Abbreviations: WTC = World Trade Center; BOE = New York City Board of Education, located in Brooklyn, NY; XXXX = deletion of information by HSN to protect respondent confidentiality.*

"Do not panic. Keep the children calm.

The ABC's of crisis response:

- (A) Assess the situation
- (B) Breathe
- (C) Calm those around you/yourself
- (D) De-escalate the situation"

**PreK/K parent**

- "Try not to show your fear/horror to your child. I realize I made my child more upset and scared when he saw how upset and scared I was.
- "I now keep an 'emergency' bag containing medication, flashlight, toothbrushes, so I don't have to scramble for those items, just in case."
- "Try to keep your child away from the TV news or radio news as difficult as that may be."
- "Decide on a number or place to call/go to if separated. Take your cell phone at all times."

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- "Child should always have 'on their person' identification with emergency contacts names and numbers."
- "Notification should be given to the Board of Education/ Superintendents office as to where their child was evacuated to – immediately."
- "There should DEFINITELY BE IN PLACE emergency evacuation procedures which should be given to students/parents on the first day of school."

**6th - 8th grade parent**

"It is absolutely crucial to provide expert counseling to parents immediately. All decisions must be transparent, with room and time for discussion. A safe space with routines needs to be established for the children as soon as possible. Moves should not be made quickly; time is needed for decompression and evaluation. Good leadership is invaluable. Children need to be provided with ways to unload and express their fears/anxieties. My school has done an exemplary job with help from many organizations, BOE and agencies. I would look to my school as a pretty flawless role model-real democracy at work. As a community we are still digesting the trauma daily- many of us are realizing that this kind of tragedy is not forgotten and will become part of the fabric of our lives and neighborhood."

**1st - 5th grade parent**

"An air of calmness and authority by parents and other adults is necessary to allay children's fears in the face of unknown danger. Ex: A mother rushed into my child's class and announced 'the building is falling down' as early as 9:00am. The children thought their school was toppling and/or the Trade Center would fall in their school. They were hysterical. There is no need for that behavior by an adult in a crisis. Some training for adults would be in order for the future."

**1st - 5th grade parent**

"Parents should have a place where they would meet if such an attack should occur. My children were with me because we were late for school that day. Our dilemma was letting my husband know where to find us. We had to leave our home; we live closer to the WTC than the school was. My husband worked at WTC and there was not any telephone service. Also in case you have to leave the city, have a place where you would meeting outside the city."

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Make sure there is an emergency evacuation plan. Establish a school website and/or other channel for communication now.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“I experienced this attack both as a parent and staff member. I learned to work on my instincts and was able to calm parents and help keep all of us together. Also made parents feel comfortable enough to get their other children from other schools.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Always trust your instincts regarding yourself and your child. Even if people tell you it’s OK and you can go, if you don’t feel it’s safe, STAY! P.S. My 12 old daughter who lives on XXXX Street is now on asthma medication when she has never had a history of breathing problems.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Do not trust public health officials when it comes to health issues. Do not trust school principals, either. Trust your nose.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Practice evacuation procedures and do not hesitate in sending the children home even if the attack is not in the immediate area of the school. But get permission from parents to do so. It is important should an attack occur, for the parent to become involved in the school activities and to let the child know that the school is a safe haven and they should not equate the attack with the child being in school. It helps to eliminate the fear of returning to school and allows them to resume a somewhat normal school existence despite the tragedy. Also, schools need to formulate alternative plans should they have to be evacuated -alternative school location.”

**PreK/K parent**

“Help others. Outside the school after I picked my daughter up, I stopped to watch friend’s children while they got their other children that were not accounted for. Parents stopped and asked if I needed help finding the parents of the children I was watching. People were panicked but still managed to try to help.”

**PreK/K parent**

“Follow your instincts. In a real emergency most people do not have answers, no one is an expert in an unforeseeable event.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Have a cell phone.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“I had a great trust in the school and its leadership, but wish a plan had been in place and that parents were informed in advance. I am now part of the school community. This is a positive outcome. The openness after the attack broke down the polite distance I had with other parents.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“If the school (teachers/principal) did not let friends (of parents) take their kids home with them the school would have been responsible for evacuating 600 kids at once. By allowing parents to take kids other than their own was a great relief. However, I understand the safety concerns of the school not knowing where or being accountable for our kids. Therefore, it would be good to have an evacuation procedure in place. If my friends didn’t take my son I wouldn’t know where he was which would have made me panic for 2 ½ hours while walking back to TriBeCa from my mid-town office.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“It’s so hard to prepare for an event like this, but parents should make sure that the school has emergency contact information on the 1<sup>st</sup> day. All schools should have an ‘outside’ meeting place established in advance in case of evacuation. For example-another school within walking distance.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“It was extremely important that we have a very strong principal and PTA president.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“I let the principal have the authority to decide when to evacuate the children, not by the authority of the Board of Education, who were not present at the time of the attack. The children most traumatized were those left at the school, not those who went home immediately after the attack. In other words, more local decision making might have averted the trauma these children experienced.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Make sure you can be REACHED everyday.”

**PreK/K parent**

“Establish a communication process with your child that includes memorizing key phone numbers and meeting places in the event parents are separated from their child. In addition, constant communication and understanding with your child throughout the transition period is required.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Given what we know now I think every school should have and inform the parents about an evacuation plan at the beginning of the school year. If the Internet site could be updated immediately with a special bulletin, that might be the best place to get/give information. Even if you don't have access to your home or office, chances are someone does. Also, when the evacuation notice is distributed, parents should be reminded that the most helpful thing they can do is to STAY calm around the children. I saw many parents (none were teachers, thank God) running through the hallways, screaming and crying on 9/11. I was in the building when both planes hit. It was very upsetting. My daughter later said that the scariest part of that morning was when parents came running into the classroom screaming ‘Come on! Come on! Let's go!’ I know exactly what she meant.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Your child's reactions are reflections of yours (the parents). I learned that if I built structure back into my son's life and made him feel as if I had my end under control, he was fine. Too many parents expose children to their every emotion; fear, anxiety, anger, worry, etc. The fact is that your child wants you to be their hero. If we can be strong for them, we go a huge distance in establishing their recovery. Save the drama for adults in your life, they know how to handle it.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“The process of recovering afterward requires excessive and organized involvement of parents to assure that government agencies' actions protect the interests of the children in everyway.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Parents take good care of yourselves. You and your well-being have a tremendous impact on your children.”

**PreK/K & 1st - 5th grade parent**

“I learned that a school community must try to stick together in tough times. Teachers, staff, the principal and parents must work together to come to decisions of compromise. Never let your community be divided by mean actions and comments towards one another. Always respect each other's decisions even if you do not agree. Also, have psychological services in place immediately for children, teachers, and parents in groups and individually.”

**PreK/K & 1st - 5th grade parent**

“It is important to provide the school with accurate emergency numbers and to have set up a system with other parents you can trust to pick up/ take care of your own children in case parents are not immediately available.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“For these things you never know, but all schools must have an emergency evacuation procedure ready. Give the parent a list of places where to be found or where the schools will be relocating to.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Keep the school district’s phone number or emergency line on your person if you can’t get through to the school. Make sure your spouse has it also. Pick your child up as soon as possible and travel away from the site of the attack. Have an emergency contact outside the area that family members can contact and the school also in case your cell phones aren’t working locally.”

**PreK/K parent**

“I was at the school during the attack so I was able to get my daughter immediately. However I had wanted to not only make sure my daughter was safe but all the school children and therefore bring all the children to a sub-basement shelter for safety. I was told there is no such place and could only take my own which broke my heart. Therefore, all schools should be built with a shelter area.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- “Try to keep calm and level headed”
- “Try to think of all the children not just your own”
- “Try not to blame and hate”
- “Stay with other people; do not isolate yourself and your family”
- “Try to listen to children talk and do not explain event”
- “Search for a deeper understanding on all levels and in all areas”
- “Avoid TV, radio, and newspapers when children are around – news programs can be very frightening to children (2-12)”

**PreK/K parent**

“Stay calm, the school has your child’s best interest at heart.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“The school must have a disaster plan that is shared with the parent body.”

“Ensure you as a parent have immediate access to your child. If not you, then a relative, friend or neighbor. Have your own disaster plan.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“I learned that the cell phones did not work properly. Your best bet is to contact someone else and have all the family members contact the same person, preferably one out of state, and have this out of town person relate messages back and forth for you and your family. Ex: If grandma lives in another state, call her and let her know you are well and where to meet you and what time. This way when another family member call, grandma can relate the message. This is what worked for me and my family.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- “Have an evacuation plan as a family.”
- “Designate a trusted family member or friend to pick up your child if it is impossible for a parent to get to the school quickly.”
- “Do not let children watch TV coverage of an attack and do not discuss details in front of young children.”
- “Always emphasize the positive (the bravery of teachers, workers, etc) and not the negative (what could have happened, deaths, etc). This makes a huge difference in how a child perceives and remembers events.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- “The school needed a better evacuation plan, and should have done it earlier.”
- “After the school was evacuated, there should have been a voice message telling parents where the students went and posting on the school building where children went and how to get there.”
- “All parents should know the evacuation plan prior to school starting.”

**PreK/K & 1st-5th grade parent**

“Since I was evacuated to triage in . . . , New Jersey after the buildings collapsed with 2 children, I was certain my daughter was at school and/or with her teachers. I never doubted that the schools 1<sup>st</sup> concern would be the safety of the children. However, since phones were not operable, my husband came to try to find all of us and said that no one on the Police Department or Port Authority had any idea where the students had been evacuated to and it took him hours to find her. The problem was all our emergency numbers were neighbors and friends in the area. It is important to have an emergency number listed outside of the specific area. A point person who would be able to be the ‘go to person’ that both the affected person and school would contact.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- “Schools should have emergency evacuation procedures that include designating other parents, not just relatives, who are authorized to take children in the event of an emergency.”
- “For several days, email was the most reliable mode of communication. Parents should be encouraged to identify an email address at which they can be located.”
- “Government officials should be prepared to circulate environmental and/or policy decisions in writing ASAP on electronic bulletin boards.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Do not depend on the Board of Education to act in the best interest of the children. They will act on a purely political basis without regard to anybody’s well-being except their own.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Only that we need to keep our cool even when the situation is chaotic and out of hand. The teachers did a super job in keeping the kids moving without panic, and apparently the handling of the aftermath was also great. My son got to a second place though, which is, or was the only choice with all the moving and relocations. If I could have done something, or better, had some saying on BOE decisions, the children would have been moved to a place for the entire school year. But that’s only if the place was suitable, which wasn’t the case.”

**6th - 8th grade parent**

- “Included in the parent/student handbook: S.O.P. for evacuation/relocation plans for easy pickup. (phone numbers, website, point of pickup).”
- “Conduct more random fire/evacuation drills.”
- “Always use independent ECO group: ‘Never trust the Feds!’”

**6th - 8th grade parent**

“That the government does very little without private advocacy.”

**6th - 8th grade parent**

“The situation is very complex. You don’t know what kind of attack is going to be, in school or close to school, so my suggestions are:

- Very important to have communication between parents, students, teachers.
- Knowledge about school building, exits, students’ rooms, office, principal.
- More security, make sure no strangers come to building.
- Have emergency plans for different situations.
- Make sure the personnel in the building know what to do in case of attack (including security workers, maintenance workers, teachers, principal, and also parents).”

**6th - 8th grade parent**

“I took the stance of supporting our teachers. I knew that they needed the most support so that they could pull themselves through for my kid. When we panic about our own needs we jeopardize the community at large. We need to support the structure. We need to create and look for small rays of hope. We desperately needed to have more community building during our fractured days. We worked together on desperate jobs of lugging boxes, farming committees and complaining but we never spoke much. We didn’t reach out to families who weren’t volunteering. What we really needed was to be together, to share stories, to meet each other, and to cry together. Please help spread the word that the teachers and staff at this school, and others in the neighborhood, are HEROS. They need more public recognition. They have been amazing.”

**PreK/K parent**

“Disaster evacuation plans should be announced and distributed within the first two days of the school year. Different scenarios should be covered. Example: I heard the existing plan called for evacuation south of the school. But that is where the attacks took place. Alternative scenarios should be clear. There should also be a toll free number for parents to call to obtain instructions in case of such an event. School administration should keep a list of parent’s numbers in a remote place, or on the internet-secure site, so that they can access them and contact parents or try to reach them instead of just waiting for the parents to reach them in the ‘new’ location.”

**PreK/K parent**

“Be involved in your community’s leadership now, before there is an emergency. Be a decision maker when the decisions are unimportant so that you are in place when it matters. Otherwise these vital decisions will be left to unqualified individuals. I never again want my fate and that of my family in the hands of individuals who do not have my best interests in mind.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

“Young children should be permitted to carry cell phones to school if they want to – with restrictions of use, of course.”

**1st - 5th grade parent**

- “During an evacuation, available adults should be designated to take responsibility of small groups of children, instead of the teacher caring for a large class and other adults just tagging along.”
- “A large scale traumatic event like this can draw people together, even strangers, because of their common experience. It’s important for the people who experience such an event to share with others who have gone through a similar experience.”
- “Because of the overwhelming complexity of impact on individual lives (loss of homes, business, family, school, community, friends) the school community and neighborhood became increasingly divisive over time. There is a great weariness and bitterness over the safety of returning to our schools and homes. The emotional impact upon our families and loss of valuable family time has been severe.”

**PreK/K parent**

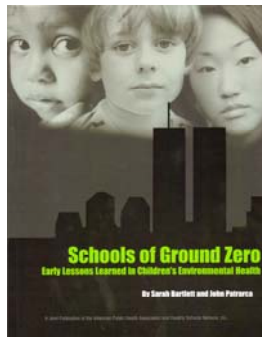
“Keep emergency ID records/tags for each child with information on their name, address, parent’s names and contact numbers, and one person’s/relative’s name and contact number who does not live in the immediate area. This would help to quickly place children with someone they know instead of waiting for someone to come and find them.”

**PreK/K parent**

**Healthy Schools Network, Inc.** seeks to assure every child an environmentally safe and healthy school, through research, education, and advocacy. The events of September 11 and its aftermath have challenged health, environment, and education agencies to understand how children are different from adults in relation to environmental hazards, and how schools are different from offices in terms of their responsibilities for the occupants and the demands on facilities.

**Notes on the 2005 edition:**

- When schools are evacuated, the victims will be more numerous and younger, and more vulnerable to the environmental hazards, than evacuees from other types of buildings (ATSDR 2001).
- Currently, no federal, state, or local agency is expressly authorized to assess and to “clear” a contaminated building for safe re-entry and re-use by children. Children are more vulnerable to environmental hazards than adults (US EPA, AAP, NIEHS, CDC).
- Post 9/11, the New York City Board of Education was under extraordinary pressure to re-open Ground Zero Schools, to normalize the stock market and Lower Manhattan businesses. Parent Associations raised their own funds, hired their own environmental consultants, and forced the clean-up of contaminated buildings, delaying the re-use of some schools. While school staff could call upon publicly supported occupational health clinics and services and NIOSH found evidence of new onset diseases among 300 staff who were returned to Stuyvesant High School in October 2001 (NIOSH, June 5, 2002 HETA 2002-0096), no public agency provided similar “occupational health services” to the parents or their school children, and no agency tracked the health effects among the 3,000 high school and medically fragile special education students who re-occupied the High School facility (***Schools of Ground Zero: Early Lessons Learned in Children’s Environmental Health***, S. Bartlett and J. Petrarca, HSN and APHA, 2002).



**SCHOOLS OF GROUND ZERO: Early Lessons Learned in Children's Environmental Health**, 347 pp, only contemporaneous account of the decisions to evacuate and re-occupy seven public schools following the World Trade Center attacks of September 11th. With \$20 donation by order only; not downloadable. Co-published with and orderable from the American Public Health Association.

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