



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2003
Number 11 *Teaching Through a Crisis:
September 11 and Beyond*

Article 8

May 2003

The Children Keep Reminding Us: One School's Experience After 9/11

Kate Delacorte
Downtown Little School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Terrorism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Delacorte, K. (2003). The Children Keep Reminding Us: One School's Experience After 9/11. *Occasional Paper Series, 2003* (11). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2003/iss11/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

educate

8 The Children Keep Reminding Us: One School's Experience After 9/11

Kate Delacorte

KATE DELACORTE went to Bank Street College beginning in 1977. She has taught three-, four- and five-year-old children. In 1999, she and Adrian Hood opened the Downtown Little School, a progressive nursery school primarily drawing upon neighborhood families in Lower Manhattan. The school serves two-to-five-year-olds, both typically developing and those with special needs.

The Downtown Little School is on Dutch Street in Lower Manhattan, just a few blocks from where the World Trade Center used to be. On September 11, we were setting up for school, with families scheduled to bring their children in for short visits. The school was supposed to actually open on Thursday, September 13. Instead, on that day my co-director, Adrian, and I were in my dining room making phone calls to the seventy-six families enrolled in our school to find out how and where they were. I remember very little from those calls except for the rush of feeling that each familiar voice brought and my surprise at just how much emotion I felt for certain families. That day of calls remains just one huge blur of emotion that left me feeling depleted, though better than I had thought possible because no one had been hurt. Everyone was alive.

At a staff meeting in my apartment on Friday, September 14, we decided to see if we could find space to open on a temporary basis, in order to provide families with a place to see each other. St. Luke's School gave us their auditorium for two days and the Civic Center Synagogue gave us their Hebrew school classrooms for two days. Maybe fewer than half our families came. Some dropped by just to check in, and others came the moment we opened the doors and stayed until we closed.

These days were filled with stories. The teachers absorbed the children's stories. Adrian and I listened to the parents. And we began to sense an overwhelming difference between the needs of the parents and the needs of the children. They had conflicting realities that needed to be affirmed.

The children had seen their world explode. Some children had seen the planes hit, others had seen the fire and the smoke. They'd seen people running for their lives and things falling from the sky. Some had witnessed people jumping from the towers. Others had been trapped inside their own smoke-filled buildings. Most had run or walked through chaos to find safety. They'd

all seen, heard, and experienced too much. They needed to understand in some small way what had happened.

The parents' need was no less compelling. They needed to believe that their children hadn't really seen what they had seen, that they hadn't understood the enormity of what had happened. Above all, the parents needed to believe that they had been able to protect their children.

The first day, a four year old walked into the auditorium, talking as he crossed the threshold. "A plane hit the World Trade Center and it fell just like this," he said, and let his sweater fall to the ground. He added, "When it fell, it landed on a playground and killed all the children." His mother told us, "I don't think he really gets it."

So many parents told me what their children hadn't seen, hadn't understood or had not yet learned about what happened on September 11. And so many children contradicted their parents through their play, through their comments and their questions.

One focus of our school year was to help the parents accept what their children already knew so that they could help them understand it as much as it could be understood, and then begin to help the children to feel safe and protected. We wanted the parents to feel again as if they were able to keep their children safe and protected.

I was in charge of helping parents. I spoke to them individually and as a group, and sent home notes or talked to them on the phone. The teachers were assigned to try to normalize life at school while making it clear to every child that he or she could play about their experiences, talk about them, and ask questions. Even before the topic could be safe at home, we had to make it safe at school.

The job was difficult because the teachers were working through their own feelings and then were immersed in the feelings of these young children. But it was not as hard as it might have been because the parents as a group seemed far more willing to put their trust in us than ever before. There were fewer complaints, more honest exchanges of ideas, and a much greater sense of community than we had had before. Through sharing our fears and experiences, and our emotions, we all grew closer.

We were not, of course, in any way prepared for 9/11; nor did we really have time to consult mental health professionals about each step we had to take. Every day and sometimes each moment of every day, the teachers were faced with decisions about how to help children begin to understand their

experience. We were all feeling our way and were often overwhelmed. We knew it was important to get it right; we wished fervently that we had a blueprint to follow. We didn't. What we did have was a school philosophy that emphasized children's emotional needs. We shared a belief in being honest with children, in acknowledging their feelings, and in helping them express a range of emotions in appropriate ways.

It was hard to determine just how honest to be. It was painful to acknowledge the children's experience. It was often difficult to decide exactly what was enough and what was too much. In our favor was the fact that we had in place a variety of ways of providing the opportunity for children to play and talk about their feelings, as well as a variety of ways to communicate to them that it was safe to do both.

Something we have always done for children is to make books about issues affecting either individuals or the group. My former co-teacher, Meredith Gary, is the teacher/director of the Williamsburg Neighborhood Nursery School in Brooklyn. While her school is at some remove from our area and their experience was less immediate, she did have to talk to her children about what had happened. She wrote a book to use with her children and asked for my feedback. Then I edited it for our school and made copies for each of our classrooms. Here it is. (See attached CD-ROM for complete text and pictures of this and other books described in this essay.)

A Scary Thing Happened

A scary thing happened in New York City. A plane hit the top of a tall building called the World Trade Center. Then another plane hit the other tower of the World Trade Center.

Then both buildings fell down. There were fires and big clouds of smoke. Moms and Dads and Babysitters took their children to safety. The moms and the dads and the babysitters and kids were scared. They saw scary things.

There were people inside the planes and people inside the buildings. Lots of people in the World Trade Center buildings got hurt or even died. Lots of the people in the World Trade Center buildings got out safely, alive.

Firefighters came to help put out the fires in the buildings that fell. They came to rescue people. Police officers came to help people too. Doctors and nurses helped too. Lots and lots of people came to help. People helped each other and tried to keep each other safe.

The buildings falling down broke the phones. Lights stopped working too. Some people couldn't stay at home because there was too much smoke or broken windows. Some people couldn't stay at home because all the helpers needed to use their buildings. People stayed with friends or family in different apartments.

All of this made people scared and worried. Moms were scared and worried. Dads were scared and worried. Babysitters were scared and worried. Teachers were scared and worried. Some grown ups cried. Some grownups were very grouchy or very serious.

All you children were probably scared and worried too. It is okay to feel scared and worried. And you can ask the grownups, "What's going on?" It is the grownups' job to try to help you understand scary things like this. It is the grownups' job to keep you safe.

A scary thing happened in New York City but you are safe with your mommy and daddy or with your babysitter and you are safe here at school.

That scary thing did happen and everything was different for a while. The World Trade Center Buildings are gone. Some firefighters died. Some police officers died. Other people died too.

But now things are getting back to the way they used to be. Lots of firefighters are alive and they are working to keep everyone safe. Lots of police officers are alive and they are also working to keep everyone safe.

And lots of people are alive and they are moving back home. Moms and Dads are cleaning up all the dust. Lights are back on. Some phones are working. Most moms and dads and babysitters are not so scared and worried anymore. Stores are opening again. Moms and Dads are going back to work.

And you are all together here at school again. You can talk about what happened. You can ask questions and play about what happened. But you don't have to be so scared and worried. You are safe here at school.

We read this book to the children and suddenly everyone was talking at once. We sent the text home to the parents and there seemed to be a stunned silence. A few parents voiced some concerns.

But first, here are the children's responses.

The Children

A three-year-old girl related the following:

I'm going to say a lot to you. One day we were trying to take Ann to school and there was a serious fire at the World Trade Center and a plane hit the building and there was a black hole and a 'credible thing, the principal was crying. I was scared because I was about to jump over the fence. I don't like fires in buildings. No more towers, not TV, not lights, not nothing. I went to Mrs. Kennedy's house and things were just perfect there.

This girl's father is a firefighter. He was with her when the planes hit the towers, and he pushed her, her sister and mother to the ground and shielded them with his body. For some time, she was extremely sensitive to pushing of any kind and would weep hysterically if a child pushed her. When her father was working on the site, she played a repetitive game with small plastic animals and playdough. The animals were buried in playdough and then uncovered by a rescue animal. Some of them were found alive and some dead.

Another three-year-old child said:

The World Trade Center has a fire and people started running and I went to someone's house and people had a mask and I didn't know what was going on. We went to my cousins' house and were safe there. We had lot of fun there... and at nighttime we stayed in a hotel... and now there's nothing there. Then the people started to run and we started to run too. And every building didn't fall but the World Trade Center. It didn't fall by accident. It was very quiet when we went back home and back to the way it was 'cept the World Trade Center.

A four-year-old boy told us that "people jumped out of the window and that was scary." And it was this same child who said about our book, "I'm gonna bring that book home with me. I need to bring that book home with me."

A five-year-old boy drew a picture after listening to the book read aloud and dictated the following:

I made the building tilted so you can tell that it's falling down. I'll make some flames, some red flames like fire. I'm making an X marks the

spot. It blew up to smithereens. Now the World Trade Center is exploded. This is what really happened. I'm making a ladder so everyone can escape. People can all climb up to safety. That's smoke. The people might go through the smoke. The man died. He's racing, racing out of the flames. Oh my gosh! Something terrible happened to him.

The Parents

The firefighter father was almost certain that his young daughter had seen and understood nothing. The mother of the three-year-old girl who revealed she knew the towers hadn't fallen by accident was one of the few parents who approached me about the book. She had told her child that it had been an accident and wasn't comfortable having her child learn the truth from someone else.

Although we had closed the gap somewhat between what parents wanted to believe their children knew and what they really knew, parents still flinched when the subject came up. For the most part, the teachers did not share the dailiness of the children's preoccupation with September 11 with their families. On Curriculum Night, I spoke to the parents about what we were seeing and what we thought might be helpful at home.

I began by noting that talk of 9/11 would be conspicuously absent from the teachers' talks.

And this omission was intentional. The teachers asked me to talk about this so that they could focus on the ordinary classroom life, on the meat of their programs and their work with the children.

This desire to keep September 11th separate, in its own place, seems characteristic of everyone right now. We all want what happened and its repercussions to be over, over for ourselves and, even more important, over for the children.

But it is neither separate nor over for adults or for the children. And what seems most important for the children is to hear the adults in their lives acknowledge what they went through and also to hear adults acknowledge the ongoing nature of the experience in adult lives. Children sense our stress, our fear and our preoccupations. It is comforting and helpful for them to understand what causes those feelings in adults, to know those feelings are not the fault of the children themselves and to know that it is the adult's job and not the child's to deal with those worries.

So we ask that you continue to talk to your children when they bring up

the subject of September 11th or when they play about what they saw. And we ask you to tell your children when you are feeling sad or scared so that they know their perceptions are correct. This does not mean that you should give the children details about the latest bomb scare. It means only that you should be even more sensitive than usual about what your children are thinking and feeling.

Ultimately, whether parents agreed or disagreed with the extent of the honesty we were encouraging, whether they continued to believe their children had remained innocent or felt their children knew too much, whether they left the television on or turned it off, our differences shrank before our growing sense of community. We had weathered a painful experience together, giving and gaining support from our school family. We had built a powerful sense of togetherness, reinforced every day by the belief that, whatever our differences, we shared a common responsibility to heal ourselves and our children.

But this notion of healing was a complicated one. For some adults, healing seemed to require a certain amount of distancing, a need to move on. Some children needed to insist that they had not been scared but only brave. Some adults wanted to keep talking and talking and most of the children seemed consumed with the need to play and play about what they'd seen. For the teachers, there was an ongoing and intense confrontation between their own feelings and their best assessment of what the children needed. Each teacher had to ask, "Do I just want them to stop building that tower over and over again or is it somehow my responsibility to help them build something different?" That's a familiar enough challenge to any teacher. We are always trying to figure out when to stay out of the child's work or play and when to intervene, but the question took on new meaning last year. And we only had our best instincts and each other to inform our decisions.

We began our healing with a book I wrote. Here it is.

Some Things Are The Same, Some Things Are Different

Some things are different since that scary thing happened in New York City. Some children are living in different apartments in different parts of New York City. They can't go home yet. They have to take the subway or the bus or a car to school. One of the children even takes a boat! All these children used to be able to walk to school.

Some children are moving away from New York City. They will live somewhere else and go to different schools.

Children here don't get to play outside so much anymore. Some playgrounds are closed. Moms and dads, babysitters, and teachers worry about the smoke and the dust and the children stay inside.

And the twin towers are not there anymore. There is just a huge mess where they used to be. There are big trucks working. There are soldiers, police officers, firefighters and other emergency workers there. They are working to clean up the mess all the time.

But there is only empty space where an important part of our city used to be.

But some things are still the same. You still live with your mommies and daddies, your brothers and sisters. Your babysitters still help to take care of you.

Some of you are back in your old homes again. Your bedroom is still your bedroom. You still play and eat and sleep at home the way you used to.

Some of the places you used to go are still open, stores and restaurants. You can buy groceries or treats. You can go to MacDonaldis or Burger King.

And you still go to school here at The Downtown Little School. It is always the same here at The Downtown Little School. Your friends are here. Your teachers are here and you are here.

The twin towers will never be the same but some day the burning and the mess will go away. Cranes pick up big pieces of the buildings and move them to tow trucks or dump trucks that drive the pieces away. Barges take some of the pieces to a dump away from this neighborhood. It takes a long time to clean up what happened. But workers and their tools, their trucks and cranes, are working all the time. The neighborhood won't be the same but it will be clean and safe.

In addition, Meredith, the author of *A Scary Thing Happened*, wrote *Feeling Better in New York City*. Elisa Crowe, another teacher at our school, wrote *Go Away Terrorists*, modeled after Ed Emberly's *Go Away Scary Green Monster* (see CD-ROM).

These books helped, but our questions were never really answered. We just kept asking them of ourselves and of each other. We kept listening to and watching the children. We kept doing our best.

The Teachers

As much as we were all focused on children and families, Adrian and I realized that the teachers needed some support too. Looking back, I think what kept the teachers going was their own investment, not only in teaching and in the particular families enrolled in the program last year, but also in the school itself. We are a small school and the teachers are a tight-knit community tied together by shared beliefs about children and about education and by shared experience. Some of the teachers were here when the school first opened. Most of us spent September 11 together, huddled in a back room of the school.

We took the teachers out for dinner to a favorite restaurant in the neighborhood to thank them for their willingness to keep coming down to this neighborhood each day and for their commitment to the program. We started contributing to the cost of transportation. We gave them mittens just for fun. We met weekly as a staff. But truthfully, we did not offer them very much support. Rather, we depended on them at least as much as they depended on us, as we all struggled to provide a place for families and children that felt safe.

Moving Forward, Always Reminded

This school year began with our Separation Meeting for the parents of the twos and threes. At this meeting, I always talk a little about separation in general and offer guidelines for the parents during our phase-in period. As I thought about separation, I immediately returned to 9/11 and the need families felt last year to keep their children close. A Brooklyn family had withdrawn their twin boys from the school because they didn't want to be separated from them by the bridge. Another family from uptown couldn't handle being separated by a few miles and also withdrew their child. I decided to mention 9/11 as a complicating factor to the separation process this year. As I looked around at the faces of the families, I felt I might have done better leaving it out. Most people looked as if I'd slapped them.

But 9/11 is still with us this year. It is less pervasive and less obvious in most of the classrooms but it is here. Parents and teachers alike thought last year's twos had been in the dark about the upheaval in their world. It is true they didn't have the language to describe their perceptions but it is not true that they were oblivious. When I walk into the threes classroom now, I often see children wielding airplanes that fly a little too close to the tall towers the children have built out of blocks. Is this typical of three-year-old block play or are they revisiting what they saw last September? The teachers ask this ques-

tion. We can't be sure. But the mother of a girl in this class tells me that her daughter is suddenly talking all the time about what she remembers. The child who had not quite turned two when her EMS father was killed is also in this class. She talks about him this year and asks questions about what happened to him. When her classmates talk about September 11 in the Dramatic Play area and fight pretend fires, she retreats to another area of the classroom because "they're scaring me." And finally, it becomes impossible not to notice that the children know much too much about world events and that every scary mention on the news of war, of snipers, of volcanoes, brings these children back to the events of 9/11. Even Halloween, with its blur of pretend scary things, seemed to drag the children back to their very real fears so vividly remembered from last September.

We have two children at the school this year whose fathers died on 9/11. The other children know.

And so we are faced once again with deciding what is too much to say to our children and what is not enough. We know the parents would prefer to think this nightmare has gone away. So would we. But the children keep reminding us that it hasn't. They keep asking for our help in understanding what they saw, and what they know. That disparity between the children's needs and their parents' still exists.

The experience is less raw now and the parents have taken over some of our struggle for themselves. Some of our families are part of a study about the effects of 9/11 on young children. One mother recently expressed concern to me about the somewhat troubling behavior of her daughter. After we talked for a while, she said she planned to consult the women running this study, saying "I just want to be able to rule out 9/11. . . Of course, I know I can't."