

# PSYCHOLOGISTS STUDY FAMILY REACTIONS TO 9/11 TERROR ATTACKS

**The traumatic events of September 11, 2001, affected everyone in a different way, and many people found that talking about their feelings helped them come to terms with fear, terrorism, and a profound sense of loss. However, America's working parents struggled with how to talk to their children about what happened, and many decided not to talk about it at all.**

Researchers working on a MARIAL project about family narratives decided to study how families reacted to the events of 9/11 and what effect it had on their children. Since the researchers had baseline data on thirty-two families that they were studying before 9/11, they were in a unique position to measure the effect of a single, stressful event, said Marshall Duke, one of two MARIAL psychologists studying family narratives. "On September 11, everybody received the same stressor at the same time. That, sad to say, is a very elegant control. It is extremely rare," said Duke.

Three graduate students working with Duke and his MARIAL colleague, Robyn Fivush, decided to revisit the families who participated in the original study. This time, in addition to repeating the same measures to determine how well the family functions, they asked each family how it dealt with 9/11.

During the interview, each family was asked to tell two stories: one about 9/11 and one about some positive family event, such as a tradition or ritual that they all did together. When they talked about 9/11, the family members described where they were and how they were feeling when they learned about the terrorist attacks. "I also asked how they got in touch with each other," said Amber Lazarus, a graduate student who works with Duke.

The children—most of whom were about age twelve—and parents each filled out questionnaires. Then the children were asked to tell two more stories—one positive, such as a family vacation, holiday, or any positive thing that happened to them, and one negative, such as the death of a pet or loved one.

"Every family was different," said Lazarus, who went to the homes of about half the families. Graduate students Jennifer Bohanek and Kelly Marin, who work with Fivush, did the other home visits. Each visit lasted up to two hours. "Some families didn't want to talk about 9/11. Others talked about it in such a way that it brought tears to my eyes," said Lazarus, who studies clinical psychology. "Some families were closer to 9/11 than others. In one case a flight attendant was stuck away from home for a couple days. In another case, a father was stuck in New York when it happened."

Some families had decided to shield their children from the events of 9/11. The children were nine to ten years old when terrorists struck the United States. Others talked to their children about what happened and reassured them that they would get through it together.

"If the kids had been shielded, the parents did most of the talking during the interview," Lazarus said. "In the families that discussed the events with their children, there was more emotion from the kids when they talked about it. In these families the parents had said, 'You might see pictures, you might hear stories. This is what happened and it was awful. But we will survive.' "

Lazarus analyzed some of the data, focusing on the "Do You Know" questionnaire in which children were asked questions about their parents and relatives. For instance, the children were asked if they knew how their parents met, where their parents grew up, where