

Helping Children With Grief

- Understand the way you do your own grieving. It is said that grief is the price we pay for love. How do you grieve? Do you ignore your losses? Bury the feelings? Stay busy? Talk about them? Probably you will use the same method with your children. You may want to think about doing things differently with your children so that they can have a healthy experience.
- If you express your feelings and accept support when you need it, your children will learn from your behavior. We adults are important role models for our children.
- Accept and acknowledge the reality that grief hurts! Don't try to rescue the child or yourself from the pain hoping that it will go away. Child grief work is a healing process and it is **work**.
- At a time of the death and well beyond, children in grief may feel frightened, insecure, and helpless. They need love, support and **structure** in their daily routine. Firm, caring rules should not be abandoned. In fact, a routine provides that sense of security and stability in, what to the child may be, a crazy, scary and mixed-up world.
- When children experience a death it is common for them to think about it happening again, either to themselves or to another important person in their life. Especially in the case of one parent dying, they often question **who will take care of them** if the other parent dies.
- Children need information given to them that they will understand at their age level. They need an explanation of the cause of death using the words *die* and/or *dead*. In trying to protect our children, we may use vague terms like *going away* or *asleep*. This only adds to their confusion. Honesty is the best policy. Do not tell a child something he or she will have to unlearn. Children will sense it when something is not true and will be reluctant to trust an adult who they think is not being truthful.
- **Listen** to children's responses to your explanations **as well as** to the questions they ask. Ask them what they understood; ask for feedback about your explanations, especially with the older children; and ask



them what they need. It is important to listen and **respect** their feelings and experiences.

- Do not close the door to doubt, questioning, and differences of opinion. People within the same family will have different ideas, attitudes and opinions about what happened. This is all right as long as people have the truth.
- Watch out for kids trying to protect grieving adults by assuming the caretaker role. Children in grief can be quite supportive. They also seem to know instinctively that the adults are suffering too and may be reluctant to make the adults suffer more by being sad themselves.
- Children will often need help in recognizing, naming, accepting, and expressing feelings. It is helpful to suggest physical or creative activities for a child who is in grief. For example, kicking boxes, tearing up paper, writing, painting, yelling, throwing dishes (preferably ones purchased at a garage sale!).
- Children can learn about death and grief *prior* to the actual death of a loved one, e.g. death of a *pet* -- how is this handled? Is the pain unbearable and the puppy replaced quickly? What does this teach the child about life and death?
- Share personal religious beliefs carefully. Children may fear or resent a God that takes to Heaven someone they love and need. This discussion within the family is very important so the children are not confused or frightened.
- Realize that a child's grief may be difficult to recognize. Feelings may be **expressed more in behaviour than in words**. Helplessness, despair, fear, and anxiety may be acted out with aggressive behaviour. Sometimes anger is directed at the safest person, often a surviving parent. It may not be conscious or rational but the child may feel that the parent should have prevented this tragedy. Talking about these feelings openly usually will mean that the child will work things out.
- Some children may go back to earlier behavior, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, and clinging to parents. This is because the earlier time was a safe time, and when they feel safe again they will no longer feel the need to do these things.

- Anticipate and discuss possible strains on relationships with family and other children. Individual family members, and the family as a whole, most often are establishing a new identity without the person who died. The other children may be uncomfortable with your child now as they are forced to think about death when your child is around.
- Reassure children, especially younger ones, that they are not responsible for the person's death. All people die. Just as thoughts or words cannot bring the person back from death, so thoughts or words do not *cause* death.
- Parents need to know that once death is explained, it is not a closed subject. The topic will surface at very interesting times. Plus, grief lasts longer than anyone expects. Children continue to deal with grief as they grow and mature. Significant rites of passage, such as entering school, puberty or graduation, can be triggers for emotional reactions.
- It is a good idea to establish lines of communication with everyone involved with the child in grief. Keep each other informed; for instance, grief usually causes difficulty in concentrating so school work may be affected. The balance between understanding the effects of grief and setting realistic expectations should be discussed with teachers, caregivers and other family members.
- Recognize the importance of rituals. **Rituals** allow you to channel your feelings and thoughts into an activity. They can make your feelings more manageable. It is often helpful to plan something at significant dates, like during a holiday season or on a birthday. Rituals can take several forms and can be done individually or as a family. For example, hanging a special ornament, lighting a candle, or setting aside a special time to remember.