



## Helping Grieving Children

Too often, when there is a death in the family, expressions of sympathy, understanding and caring are directed solely to the grieving adults. Children are sometimes ushered off to a friend or relative's house in an effort to protect them from the painful feelings of grief. As a result, grieving children may not get the support they need as they go through their own unique grieving process. Following are some suggestions for adults wishing to attend to the needs of grieving children:

- Be a good observer. Avoid rushing in with explanations and advice. You cannot "fix" a child's grief.
- Don't expect the grieving children's reactions to be obvious or immediate. Remain patient and available.
- Tell children honestly what happened. Use simple and direct language that is appropriate to their ages. Answer their questions honestly. It's okay to say "I don't know," or "I struggle with that question too."
- Grieving children need to know that sadness, loneliness, fear and anger are normal and legitimate feelings. They look to adults as models. Don't be afraid to cry. Provide a safe atmosphere for the expression of feelings.
- "If only I had..." Children need to know that neither their thoughts nor their actions caused the death.
- When a child is ready, softly encourage active grieving. LISTEN. Ask the child to tell you about the death event and/or his thoughts and feelings about it. Keep in mind that some children's grief may take the form of physical complaints (i.e. stomach ache, head ache, sleep problems, nightmares, etc.)
- Get in touch with your own mortality and with your own thoughts and feelings about death.
- It is important for children to know that death is something that all people think about and that they are not alone in the thoughts.
- Encourage children to express fears and fantasies.
- As adults, we tend to want to protect children from the sometimes-scary feelings of grief. Remember, we are role models for children. It is important that we attend to our own needs, learn to express our feelings, and find adequate support for ourselves. Children will mimic us – so if we are health grievers, chances are, they will be healthy grieving children.