

# PATHWAYS CENTER

## *for* GRIEF & LOSS

### **SUPPORTING CHILDREN COPING WITH ILLNESS AND LOSS**

Grief is the internal response we experience when you lose someone or something that you care about. As soon as a person is diagnosed with a disease, injured in an accident, or has died, you begin the grieving process. This includes children just as much as it does adults. Their lives are different and their relationship with that person has changed due to the illness or loss.

The best way you can help children during this time of change is to encourage them to express their feelings and ask questions. Children need reassurance that someone will be there to support them. They need to feel *included* in what is happening in the family. *When children are not included in this process, they feel isolated and are more anxious. They may fill in the unanswered questions with their own misconceptions, which will also increase their level of fear and anxiety.*

Suggestions that might be helpful:

- Maintain a routine, as this promotes security and safety. Consider having an additional adult available to provide support, because it's impossible for any one person alone to provide everything children may need during this stressful time.
- Be aware that children grieve intermittently. Although it may appear as though they don't care, at times they cannot handle the intensity of the emotional pain related to the illness or loss and need to take a break to play or "forget" for a while.
- Expressive arts such as drawing, writing, painting, or working with clay can be very helpful, especially with children who are very young or not comfortable with talking.
- Gentle discipline is as important as hugs and kisses. This shows that you care and provides needed structure during what can be a very chaotic time.
- When children ask a question, be sure to understand what they are asking. Ask, "What do you think?" which encourages children to clearly state what their thoughts are about the illness or death.
- When you answer any question, be honest. Explain what is happening in simple terms, making sure to use language children can understand. Books are wonderful tools to use and are readily available at Hospice & Community Care or local bookstores/libraries. If you are not sure how to answer a question, be honest with children about that and reassure them that you are there to provide support.
- Create special rituals around birthdays, holidays, and special anniversaries. Organizing photographs, making a collage or memory book or lighting a special candle with children can be very meaningful.

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- Use children's natural curiosity to help them deal realistically with death. The physical facts are of great interest to them so try not to perceive them as morbid or unusual.
- Deaths of pets and plants as well as seasonal changes are teachable moments. Allow children to experience their thoughts and feelings as you normalize these natural processes in life.

#### Typical Grief Responses in Children:

- May feel like it's all a bad dream; that maybe it didn't *really* happen
- Feel guilty that perhaps they caused the loved one's illness or death
- Feel angry with the person who is sick or has died; angry with all the changes
- Experience difficulty concentrating in school and can't pay attention or sit still
- Perhaps imitate and act like their loved one
- May have trouble sleeping or will dream about the person who is sick or has died
- Worry because they can't stop thinking about their loved one
- May dwell on *how* the person got sick or died and wonder why
- Frequent mood changes over the smallest things and may cry suddenly
- Fear of others dying

When children are affected by illness or loss, the adults around them are also under stress. Coping in times of crisis can be physically and emotionally exhausting. If you are one of these adults, take care of yourself in ways that are nurturing to you. Turn to friends and family members your children know and trust.

There is no magic formula. Even though it may take more time and effort, including your children in this process helps all of you get through this difficult time. Open, honest communication with your children not only works to strengthen your relationship with them, but also enhances their ability to cope with difficult experiences in the future. Remember, grief expressed is grief diminished.