

# PATHWAYS CENTER

## for GRIEF & LOSS

### WHAT TO DO: HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE DURING A LOVED ONE'S TERMINAL ILLNESS

#### 3- to 5-year-olds

- Allow regular times such as breakfast or bedtime for children to ask questions about what they see happening. Give simple explanations. Be honest without being overly optimistic or pessimistic.
- Provide consistent substitute childcare when the well parent/caregiver is not able to be available.
- Maintain routines and schedules as much as possible.
- Allow planned, time-limited hospital visits. Prepare children for what they will see (IV lines, O<sub>2</sub>, change in loved one's appearance).
- Understand children's need for play as a means of expression of feelings as well as a coping mechanism when things feel overwhelming.

#### 6- to 8-year-olds

- Reassure children that the illness is not their fault. Children this age often blame themselves when bad things happen. Provide accurate information about the cause of the patient's illness.
- Children can be overwhelmed by an adult's strong display of anger or sadness. Controlled emotions are often most effective for discussing events with children.
- Communicate with children's teachers and other significant adults about the loved one's illness.
- Provide reassurance to children that the family will be able to get through this difficult time together.

#### 9- to 12-year-olds

- Provide honest, detailed information about the loved one's diagnosis and decline as it occurs.
- Help children remain involved in after-school activities, sports, and contact with friends.
- Acknowledge with children the stress of living with uncertainty and provide reassurance about the strength of the family unit.
- Support children's desire to help with the patient's care, but don't allow children to be independently in charge of caregiving tasks.
- Encourage children to read, write, or draw about the disease and their own reactions if they indicate an interest.

#### 13- to 18-year olds

- Involve teens when talking about their loved one's illness. They need to trust that adults will be open and truthful with them.
- Enlist the help of other caring adults to provide transportation as needed in order to allow the teen to continue participation in peer activities.
- Keep the school informed about serious illness in the family. Teachers and staff need to be supportive without drawing attention to the student.
- Allow teens to participate in the patient's care, being careful not to overwhelm him or her with too much responsibility.

*(over)*

# WHAT TO DO: HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE AFTER A LOVED ONE'S DEATH

## 3- to 5-year-olds

- Explain in concrete details the fact that when a person dies, all bodily functions stop and the person does not come back.
- Prepare children for what they will see and experience during rituals like funerals, memorials and wakes. Encourage – but do not force – participation.
- Assign a trusted adult to see to the children's needs and take them away from the activity if needed.
- Provide transitional objects or possessions of the deceased that seem important to children such as clothing, letters or a special gift.
- Expect some regressive behavior such as separation anxiety, sleeping problems or bedwetting, or a surge in clinging and crying behavior.

## 6- to 8-year-olds

- Understand that children's expressions of grief are often brief and episodic.
- Provide reassurance of your ability to love and care for your children despite your own grief.
- Inform the school of the death. Explore supportive services available to children if they become upset while at school, and tell children about these.
- At this age, children's regressive behavior may include stubbornness and "acting out" as well as sleeping problems and some anxiety about returning to school.

## 9- to 12-year-olds

- Invite children to participate in rituals, either directly or indirectly. They can write about the person who died or convey their views to other presenters at the rituals.
- Normalize children's concerns about returning to school and feeling "different" from their friends. Talk about the supports available to them in the school.
- Help children choose appropriate mementos that had belonged to the deceased.
- At this age, children may exhibit either emotional avoidance or emotional outbursts that are followed by feelings of embarrassment.

## 13- to 18-year olds

- Create an open environment for sharing and asking questions. Teens need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings about the death and have those feelings validated.
- For many teens, keeping clothing of the deceased, or having a significant item (a watch or other jewelry, sports equipment or trophies, tools) helps them "feel closer" to the person who died.
- Support a teen's choice to return to school soon after the death.
- Encourage the teen to draw support from the teen's peer group and other important adults such as teachers and relatives.

*Adapted with permission, Christ GH and Christ AE. Current Approaches to Helping Children Cope with a Parent's Terminal Illness. CA Cancer J Clin 2006; 56; 197-212.*



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