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HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

The grieving process of children is affected to a large extent by the age or stage of development of the child. But, there are fundamental similarities between a child's grief and an adult's mourning process. Following are a list of suggestions that may be helpful in supporting a child's grief process.

1. Set time aside to talk with your child – explain the events that are occurring, why you are crying, etc.
2. Use basic words like “die” and “dead” to convey the message.
3. Use the deceased person's name when referring to him/ her.
4. Avoid the phrases that “soften the blow”: phrases such as “sleeping”, “went on a vacation”, “God took them” or “God needed them more than we did”, etc. They only confuse and scare a child.
5. We should have an understanding of our grieving process, since these things are communicated to the child. If you would like more information about grieving, speak to a counselor or grief therapist.
6. Read, or have your child read, children's books related to death. Discuss these books with your child. Many are available at libraries, online or through book stores.
7. Read books yourself on helping a child through grief.
8. Be sensitive to the age of your child, and his/her level of understanding – don't offer information beyond the child's comprehension, as it will only confuse matters.
9. Let your child ask questions, answer truthfully! Be honest, simple and direct. If you don't understand something, let your child know that too.

- 10. Play with the child (e.g. dolls, drawing, imagining) in ways that will allow the child to express his/her feelings**
- 11. Watch for T.V. programs that might help your child's understanding.**
- 12. Share your feelings and experiences with the child if he/she is able to understand them.**
- 13. Allow you child to participate, if he/she wants to; like going to the funeral, visiting the cemetery. However, it is important that you don't pressure your child into doing any of these things.**
- 14. Accept help from others to watch your children and talk with them – but remember, you are the most important person to your child.**
- 15. You are a role model to your child – if you hide your grief, they will learn to hide it too.**
- 16. Let your child vent his/her emotions and acknowledge them, e.g. crying, hugging, tug of war, letter writing, journaling, exercise.**
- 17. Watch for tell-tale signs of maladjustments, e.g. eating and/or sleeping disturbances over a long period of time.**
- 18. Seek pastoral or family counseling if the grief is unresolved.**
- 19. Remember, a child will have the same feelings we have, but a different level of understanding.**
- 20. Communicate to the child your appreciation of having had the deceased person around.**
- 21. Help the child recover memories about the loved one. Photo albums and newspaper clippings will help you get started.**
- 22. Discuss and have the child recognize changes in routine due to the death.**
- 23. Plan some things that you and your child can look forward to.**

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Coping As A Family

Communication is the key to coping and growing as a family through grief. It is important to be together to talk, cry, rage, or even sit in silence. At the same time there should be respect for each member's way of handling his or her grief. Some family members will grieve privately, others openly, and others a combination of these two styles. In many ways each family member must grieve alone. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief.

- Maintain balance of attention between deceased family members and surviving family members.
- Try to be sensitive to each other's feelings. Feelings are often difficult to verbalize. Listen to what is meant as well as to what is said.
- Hugs, or a hand on the arm or back, gives comfort and a sense of closeness.
- It may be helpful to set aside time to be "alone together" as a family or to even hold a family meeting. Encourage but don't pressure family members to talk and express grief their own way. Be a good listener.
- Plan family projects or trips.
- Be careful not to give each other the silent treatment. Make sure the person who has died continues to be part of family conversations.
- Everyone has a unique way of grieving, which can at times be at cross-purposes among family members. Accept each person's method of coping.
- Discuss the loved one's former role in the family which now necessitates in family duties and new roles for the survivors in the family. Be careful not to expect a family member to replace or to be the same as the member who died.
- If depression, withdrawal, grief or family problems are getting out of control, seek professional help.

- Recognize that anniversaries, birthdays and special holidays will be difficult for the family and each member of the family. Discuss together how to observe these occasions. Should there be a variation on traditional celebrations? Do any family members have particular concerns, suggestions?
- Consult family members on the disposition of the deceased loved one's possessions, including their room. Take your time and tread carefully where these precious mementos are concerned. If possible, put off making major decisions about moving, giving away possessions, etc.
- Studies show that a bereaved person's self-esteem is extremely low. Survivors should work on their image of themselves and help each family member to think and feel good about themselves.
- Remember it is difficult to help family if you are falling apart. Working on your own grief will eventually enable you to help your family cope with their grief.