

## **GUIDELINES IN HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH**

- Recognize a child may grieve much slower than an adult. Children seem to deal with the grief appropriate to their current age and development. They also tend to deal with grief again at a later age.
- Be open and honest with the child- explain truthfully what happened and help them to understand the death was not their fault. Be patient, allowing the child to hear the details and ask the same questions many times.
- Keep the door open for communication with your child by allowing them to express their feelings and emotions. Validate that what they are feeling is normal. Remember that crying is helpful and promotes healing in the grieving process. Share your own feelings, and allow the child to comfort you.
- Offer warmth and affection with your physical presence. Communicate through touch, especially when initially informing a child about death.
- Reassure the child that death is not “contagious,” that the death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.
- Strive to maintain order, stability and security in the child’s life. Keep the child informed of family member’s schedules to provide security in the family unit.
- *When appropriate*, let the child make the decisions to attend or not to attend funeral activities. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.
- Children are often thought to be too young to realize the significance of death. Because we have difficulty dealing with death, we can’t imagine a young child coping with it. In their silence we may perceive them to be unaffected. Yet nothing in life will affect a child as deeply as the death of a parent, brother, sister, or friend.
- Children need help from adults to cope with their grief. In order to keep a child from being emotionally scarred and stunted is important that the child move through the stages and responses of grief in a similar pattern as an adult. However, the timing is different, the responses are different, and the understanding of death is different.
- Children may act out their feelings through their behavior which includes regressive behavior (IE. Tantrums, wetting the bed and nightmares).

In John Bowlby's ground breaking work on childhood mourning, he established that children grieve as painfully as adults and may experience:

1. Fears for personal safety and survival
  2. separation anxiety
  3. impaired ability to make emotional attachments
  4. sadness
  5. anger
  6. guilt
  7. shame
  8. despair
  9. problems with control issues
  10. drops in energy
  11. loss of self-esteem
  12. pessimism
  13. feeling useless or unsuccessful
- Reaching out to grieving children is very important. As a child grows, their psychological needs and understanding change. A child's chronological age and physical development will affect their thinking patterns, perceptions, and language skills. All of these factors will affect a child's ability to understand what has happened.