

## **Suggestions for Helping Children Understand Death and Dying**

The needs of all children at this time include:

1. Clear, understandable and developmentally appropriate information
2. Reassurance that they are safe
3. The feeling of being involved and cared for
4. Help in identifying and understanding the grief of others around them
5. Acknowledgment of, and respect for, their own thoughts and feelings
6. Continuation of usual interests and activities i.e. school, birthday parties, sports, etc.

Encourage children to talk about death. The real question is not whether we should talk to children about death, but when and how. When you talk about death, it is important to include feelings. Don't be afraid of displaying emotions.

In talking with children, especially young ones, it is important to use the words "death, dying, or dead," and to explain that the body ceases to function. If we talk about death as "sleep," children may become afraid to go to bed. Children respect adults who are honest and open about death. Talk about death as permanent without euphemisms, myths, half-truths or fables. Children need reassurance that death is NOT a result of their negative thoughts, feelings, wishes, or actions.

You may wish to monitor your children's social media activity and cell phone use. It is important that children do not hold on to photos or videos related to the death, as this is unhealthy and delays the recovery process.

If you select materials to help explain death and dying to children, it is important to keep in mind your children's ages and intellectual development.

### **Reassuring Children**

Children depend on adults. If we are unavailable for them, they have no one to turn to for help with their confusion, doubts, questions and fears.

Adults need to be able to comfort a child, even if it appears that the child is unaffected by death. It is more frightening for a child to be sent away than to stay and see a parent or other adult cry. If you feel you are unable to comfort your child because of your own grief, find someone who can. Don't try to deal with the grief of a child if you can't deal with your own. Help is always available.

Strive to recognize when a child is in pain. Death hurts, and a child needs to be comforted and reassured that someone is there to help. Reassurance is both physical and verbal. Hold your child and say it is okay to cry, feel sorry and talk about fears.

Check up periodically on how children are coping with their loss. Ask them directly if there is any help you can give. If you offer help, be sure to follow up on what you say you will do.

Remember, children are individuals. They will all grieve differently, so avoid telling children how to grieve. Don't be surprised if children do not appear to be grieving. Sometimes they are trying to control their feelings. Encourage them to talk and share.