

Techniques for Helping Bereaved Children



Common Signs of a Child's Grief

When children learn that someone they love has died, they have many of the same physical and emotional responses as adults, but will mourn their loss in different ways.

Adults need to be aware of these signs of mourning in order to accurately meet their children's needs. When children's mourning behaviours are wrongly perceived as misbehaviour, the children's hurt and confusion may deepen.

Anxiety - Children may lose their sense of security and fear another death or loss. Young children may become clinging or demanding.

Vivid memories - Real or fantasised images related to the death can intrude on other thoughts. Memories can show up as dreams or nightmares.

Disturbed sleep - Difficulty sleeping is very common. If 'sleep' is used to describe death, the child may have a fear of sleeping. Children who cannot mourn the death during the day may have more dreams and nightmares about it at night.

Sadness - Some children cry. Some children don't. Some are sad for a long time; some aren't. Some children try to hide their sadness to protect their parents. Children may long for the person who died, become preoccupied with memories, or may carry an object that reminds them of the deceased. For a while, this can help the child deal with the pain.

Anger - Children may become very angry at death, God, or adults in general. Or they may be angry at themselves, and somehow feel responsible for the death.

Guilt - Some children believe they are responsible for the death. Some may feel guilty because of a thought or deed. Feelings like, "It was my fault" or "I must have been bad" may cause lingering guilt.

The child needs to talk about these feelings and needs your help to understand that they are not true.

School problems - The child may learn more slowly than usual due to difficulties in concentrating, memories, sadness and grief.