

## A Few Thoughts for Parents

You are faced with the challenge of helping your child cope with the life-threatening illness or death of a family member or friend. It is beneficial to give children some understanding of what they are experiencing, to give them labels for their feelings, and to let them know they are not alone in having these feelings. The goal is to help them grieve, not to make the grief go away. There are several things to consider:

**Be honest with yourself.** Recognize that you are grieving, too. Be an advocate regarding the time you need to deal with the illness and loss. You may need someone to fill in for you while you care for an ill family member and take on additional family responsibilities for the ill or dying person, as well as your children. You'll probably need a few minutes alone, too. If you are uncomfortable with certain topics or aspects of approaching this situation, ask others-- the social worker, school psychologist or counselor. You don't have to do it all and you don't have to do it alone.

**Be honest about your feelings.** Share what you are feeling through simple statements coupled with comments about what you do to express and cope with these feelings. Encouraging the children to share and express what they feel is more effective when you model this behavior.

**Be honest with the limits of your knowledge.** The illness or death of a person your child knows may raise questions about why it happened, what it feels like to undergo surgery, to be ill, or to die, and what happen during the person's treatment or after their death. For many of these you will have no answers. It is important to ask what they think, for often such questions represent other worries or concerns that you can address. A simple "I don't know, but I wonder about that, too" may be the most helpful and truthful answer you can give.

**Provide opportunities for feeling expression.** Grieving is often a mixture of anger and sadness. Allow time for tears. Let the children know that crying is a normal reaction to losing someone or something we value; that seeing a life-threatening condition or saying good-bye to a family member can be very sad. Children often view crying as a sign of weakness or immaturity. They may need help to see tears as something positive for adults as well as children.

Finding constructive outlets for anger may be your greatest challenge. It is important to help the children define the source --at whom and about what they are angry. Anger can be released through verbal activities such as role-playing or writing down what you wish you could say or do to the subject of the anger. Physical outlets, such as throwing bean bags at a target, throwing a ball at a wall, or working with clay (pounding, pulling, squeezing) can help release the energy that anger creates.

For older children, anger may be channeled into a project related to the cause of their loved one's illness or death. A sense of meaning can be attached to the tragedy through fund raising to support community action or informational campaigns to increase peer and public awareness.

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***Maintain home routine and rules.*** Children gain security from structure and routine. While brief interruptions may occur to accommodate hospitalizations, surgery, or a memorial service, returning to routine provides the comforting reassurance that some things will not change and continue as before. This also helps kids know there are some things they can have control over in their lives.

***Add feeling-related ideas to your regular activities.*** The need to express feelings will not end with the illness or even with a funeral. It is important, over the months that follow, to continue to provide opportunities for feeling expression. Art and writing projects can be built around feeling themes--things that make you happy, what you do when you feel sad, drawing or writing about a memorable day. Stories about coping with illness and death, or drastic life changes such as divorce or moving, can be incorporated into reading activities.

***Recognize and affirm your privileged position.*** This is a time when you can have a very positive influence on your children. How you help them handle this grief will, in some large or small way, help them in the future. Giving them permission to feel and share those feelings, to cry, to love and to care may be the greatest single gift you ever give them.