

# Helping Children Cope with Grief

Your child's reaction to death will be determined by his/her developmental level and age.

**Ages 3-5:** Children see death as temporary and reversible, not as a permanent process. Children will often ask when their loved one will return. They fear separation more than death. Typical grief responses can include nightmares and regressive behaviors such as clinging, bedwetting, thumb sucking, temper tantrums and/or withdrawal.

**Ages 5-9:** Children are beginning to understand that death is permanent, but not universal. Death is often personified as a ghost or boogeyman. Children will often express their grief through play.

**Ages 9-12:** Children understand that death is permanent, personal, and universal. They understand they, too, will die someday. Death is seen as happening to only the old or the very sick. They are fascinated with the macabre and the details of death. Grief may be exhibited through physical complaints, moodiness, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, or isolation from peers.

**Ages 12+:** Most adolescents have reached adult levels of understanding about death. Many have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about death. Some adolescents challenge death by participating in dare-devil activities, such as drag racing or drug experimentation.

The following are some suggestions for helping your child cope with the death of a loved one:

- Understand the kinds of feelings that your child may have. Fear, sadness, anger, and confusion are all normal reactions. Your child may express these feelings in conversation or through his/her actions.
- Allow your child to talk about the death and ask questions. Answer questions as simply as you can. It's ok to say that you don't know how to answer all of the questions.
- Have your child draw pictures of his/her feelings.
- Explain the ritual of funeral ceremonies. Have your child participate in grief rituals as he/she desires. Remember, your child's imagination about death may be more frightening than its reality.
- Resume your regular family/school activities and schedules as soon as possible. Continuity is one way to help your child feel secure.
- Reassure your child that you are healthy, you are careful when you drive, and that you expect to be around for a long time.
- Seek help if you have questions about your child's behavior. Express your concerns with your school's counselor, teacher, or principal.