

Grief and Mourning for the Family

and Friends of a Child Who Has Died

For those who have lost a loved one, death or permanent injury of a family member is not just another psychological issue. Counseling, funeral attendance, grave visitation, memory books, family gatherings, and rituals for anniversaries must all be considered. Infants, toddlers and “uninvolved” siblings have issues. Grief intervention or denial of grief and mourning can represent damageable or ominous conflict. The best intervention for some children and families may involve support and companionship for rituals. Counseling or therapy may be necessary for complicated grief.

It is important to recognize that grief and mourning is a natural process. Teams should be prepared by locating protocols and programs before they are needed. Remember that an overwhelmed survivor is not automatically mentally ill. Take your lead from them and listen carefully to determine their needs. Don't censor the survivor's pain with reassurances and respect their sense of loss. Provide simple, honest explanations when asked. Consider the entire family, including friends, neighbors and line staff when making referrals. The developmental stage of a child is critical so be familiar with the various stages and what you might expect. Don't forget to ask for help with your own pain. Don't hide it and don't impose it.

Children Are Aware

Long before we realize it, children become aware of death. They see dead birds, insects and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on TV. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of every day life, and children, at some level, are aware of it.

If we permit children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing interest in and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest and comfortable with our own feelings, often easier said than done. Perhaps we can make it easier for ourselves and our children if we take a closer look at some of the problems that might make communication difficult, particularly about death.

Communication Barriers

There is a delicate balance between avoidance and confrontation. Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us, but not talking about something doesn't mean we aren't communicating. Children are great observers. We also express ourselves by what we don't say. Children may believe that if the adults can't talk about

it, it must be really bad, so they'd better not talk about it either. Instead of protecting our children, we may be causing them more worry. On the other hand, it also isn't wise to confront children with information they don't yet understand or want to know. We must seek a delicate balance. This isn't easy to achieve.

All the Answers

When talking with children, many of us feel uncomfortable if we don't have all the answers. Young children, in particular, seem to expect parents to be all knowing, even about death. But death, the one certainty in life, is also life's greatest uncertainty. Coming to terms with death is a life-long process. While not all our answers to children may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where we have doubts, an honest, "I just don't know," may be more comforting than an explanation, which we don't quite believe.

Overcoming Taboos

Death is a taboo subject, and even those who hold strong beliefs may avoid talking about it. Once death was an integral part of family life. People died at home, surrounded by loved ones. Adults and children experienced death together, mourned together, and comforted each other.

Today, people die in hospitals and nursing homes. The living have become isolated from the dying. Consequently, death has taken on an added mystery and, for some, added fear.

Many people are beginning to realize that treating death as a taboo does a disservice to both the dying and the living, adding to loneliness, anxiety and stress for all. Efforts are underway to increase knowledge and communication about death as a means to overcoming the taboo.

Developmental Stages

Children go through a series of stages in the understanding of death. For example, preschool children usually see death as reversible, temporary and impersonal. Between the ages of five and nine, most children are beginning to realize that death is final and that all living things die, but they still do not see death as personal. From nine or 10 through adolescence, children begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they too will die someday.

How You Can Help

The sudden, unexpected death of any infant or child may evoke very strong grief reactions in surviving family members, caretakers and friends. All persons involved in the investigation process must acknowledge this grief. There are several ways investigative personnel can be of service and support to families who experience this tragedy:

- Assure yourself that the family understands what you are communicating by using a trained and/or experienced interpreter;
- Acknowledge the family's grief by offering condolences and proceeding with the investigation in a sensitive manner;
- Be sensitive to the diversity of racial, ethnic and religious differences, and cultural practices and beliefs surrounding both the investigative process and death itself;
- Assure the family that everything possible will be done to identify the cause of their infant's or child's death;
- Explain that questioning and an autopsy are standards in Minnesota's Infant Death Investigation Guidelines;
- Refer the family to appropriate community resources;
- Contact the police chaplain or crisis team for the community; and
- Provide accurate, timely information about the final determination of cause and manner of death.