

## CHILDREN AND GRIEF

### PARENT HANDOUT

The degree to which children are affected by loss is determined by a number of factors: degree of closeness to the deceased, presence of other grief issues, their perception of death in general and of this death in particular, whether they witnessed the death and the level of support and understanding they receive following the death.

Children commonly experience feelings of guilt, anger, fear, disbelief, blame and confusion following a death. In the event of a traumatic death, they may lose trust in themselves, others and God. They may fear more losses and not want to leave your side. They are apt to be anxious and have abnormal sleep and eating patterns. They may be unable to concentrate and may withdraw from social activities. They may regress into more immature behaviors. These are normal reactions and should pass within six weeks or so.

Quite often, the emotional experience of grieving children is disjointed and confused. They may talk little of the loss but their behavior changes. Parents may not immediately recognize behaviors such as angry outbursts, aggression, falling grades, substance abuse, rebellion or other problems as attempts to cope with the pain of loss in the months following a death. Children, like all people, will go through a process of grief and will experience different emotions and reactions at different times.

To support your grieving child, try the following:

- **LISTEN** Establish yourself as someone your child can talk to. Accept his/her feelings without judgment or argument. Encourage expression. Talking and crying provide relief to a grieving child. Some children benefit from creative expressions such as drawing or role playing.
- **BE FLEXIBLE** Maintain normal routine and rules, but be flexible on unnecessary chores or activities. Work with your child on how to best structure time.
- **CHECK IN** Ask your child periodically about his/her thoughts and feelings about the death. Remember that grief is a process that can take years and reactions will change over time.
- **OBSERVE** If your child is showing signs of extreme disturbance or serious depression, seek professional help.
- **EDUCATE** Help your child to learn effective, safe ways to cope with pain. Share your experiences with loss and how you coped. Help him/her find ways to help the living. Young children often believe that death is reversible, that the deceased will return; help them to accept the finality of death.
- **BE PATIENT** Your child is struggling to cope. He/she will need lots of reassurance, support, love, and care.
- **LEARN** If you feel overwhelmed by the stress of caring for your grieving child, consult with outside resources. Talk with other parents, a mental health professional, school personnel, or a pastor for support and new ideas.