

## CHILDREN AND GRIEF

### **How should I explain death to my child?**

Since death is a natural part of life, parents should talk to their children about the subject in a natural, conversational, factual style. The best education is an ongoing one. Answer questions as they arise. Raise the issue and discuss it when you see a dead bird or when a pet or relative dies.

### **What should I tell my child?**

When talking about death, provide honest information. Teach your child that "dead" means not moving, not breathing, not seeing, and not feeling. The person's or animal's body ceases to work. Keep the explanation simple, concrete, and brief. Use the words "dead," "die," and "death." Avoid words like "lost" or "passed away," which may be misunderstood by a child.

### **What if my child keeps asking questions?**

Children absorb abstract concepts slowly. It is common for them to ask questions about the death of a loved one, friend, teacher, or pet weeks or months later. Expect to repeat many of the same responses.

### **If my child doesn't talk about death, does that mean that he or she is handling it well?**

Not necessarily. It does mean that the child is handling it in his or her own way. If children do not receive accurate, honest information about death, their imaginations will fill in the blanks. And what they don't know can be scary.

### **How do I ease my child's fear about death?**

The more a child grows up with a healthy understanding of death, the less fear that child will have. When parents try to protect their children from death by shielding them from the experience and from the rituals of mourning, children learn that death is a taboo, mysterious, and therefore fearful issue.

### **How do I ease my child's fear of abandonment?**

Death can bring up basic fears of abandonment for children. Assure your child that you will be there for him or her. Distinguish between common illnesses and serious diseases.

### **Should children attend the wake and funeral?**

Children should not be forced to attend. But if they wish to go to the wake and funeral, it can provide an excellent means of ritualizing the experience and allowing them to say, "goodbye." You can prepare them for what they will encounter by offering a simple, concrete explanation of what they will see and experience.

### **How do children grieve?**

Children grieve differently than adults. They feel many of the same feelings, but they express their feelings in a different way. Adults often release their emotions by crying and talking. Children often express their emotions through their behavior and their play. They also process only a little at a time. It's very normal for them to be sad for a while, then jump up and start playing happily in the backyard. Finally, children revisit their grief at times of significant change.