



*Touching*  
**Grief**

**Frequently Asked Questions  
About Child and Adolescent Grief**

**Jean B. McCaw, MA, ATR-BC**



## **Dedication**

To my mother, Jini McCaw,  
a woman with tremendous love and compassion,  
who inspired me to do this work

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# CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b> .....	0
<b>Introduction</b> .....	0
<b>CHAPTER 1—How a Child or Adolescent Learns About Death</b> .....	0
<b>CHAPTER 2—Preparing for the Death of a Loved One</b> .....	8
How do I talk about the terminal illness of a family member?	
What is anticipatory grief?	
How do I prepare my child for the eventual death of a loved one?	
What if my child is not able to say goodbye before the death?	
<b>CHAPTER 3—When There Has Been a Death</b> .....	11
What do I tell my child when there has been a sudden death?	
What do I do immediately after the death to support my child?	
Should my child attend the funeral or memorial service?	
Is there anything I should tell my child’s teacher, counselor, or principal when my child returns to school?	
<b>CHAPTER 4—Remembering Your Loved One through Ritual</b> .....	14
Are there other ways we can remember our loved one?	
<b>CHAPTER 5—Providing Support to Your Grieving Child: What You Need to Know</b> .....	15
Where do I begin?	
Nine things you need to know to help you support your child through the process of grieving.	
Suggestions for remembering, grieving, and moving forward.	
How do I help my child cope with insensitive things people say or the unkind comments other children make?	
How do I answer questions that don’t really have answers?	
What is a contingency plan and why is it important?	
What if my child wants to talk about this loss and I don’t?	
How does my grief impact my child or teen?	
<b>CHAPTER 6—Child and Adolescent Development: Related Behaviors and the Grief Process</b> .....	21
Are there common behaviors that I might see in my child, and what do I need to know about them?	
Common feelings and behaviors.	
How do I know what my child or teen understands about illness and death?	
Developmental stages of grief	
Will my child ever stop grieving?	

<b>CHAPTER 7—Defining Relationships and Understanding How They Can Affect the Grief Process</b> .....	28
How does my child’s relationship with our loved one impact how he grieves?	
Will a child or teen grieve differently when they experience the death of a sibling, parent, grandparent, or other loved one?	
<b>CHAPTER 8—Outside Factors that Influence How Your Child Copes with Loss</b> .....	32
How do previous losses, cultural and religious beliefs, our support system, or the grief of others impact how my child copes with this death?	
What if the relationship with the family member was conflicted?	
<b>CHAPTER 9—Different Types of Sudden Loss and How They May Impact Your Child</b> .....	35
How do I support my child if the death was due to an accident, illness, violence, or the result of war?	
What is disenfranchised grief?	
<b>CHAPTER 10—When to Find Professional Support for Your Child or Adolescent</b> .....	39
How do I know when my child needs help?	
<b>CHAPTER 11—How to Find a Professional Counselor for Your Child, Adolescent, or Family</b> .....	41
How do I find a professional counselor who will be good for my child, teen, or family?	
How do I find a counselor in my community?	
<b>CHAPTER 12—Types of Bereavement Support: Individual Counseling, Support Groups, and Weekend Camp</b> .....	43
Which is more helpful, individual counseling or a support group?	
What is grief camp and is it appropriate for my child?	
<b>CHAPTER 13—The Grieving Process as an Opportunity for Growth</b>	
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Suggested Readings for Children .....	46
Suggested Readings for Adolescents .....	47
Suggested Readings for Adults .....	48
Suggested Readings for Parents and Caregivers .....	48
Resource Bibliography .....	49

## PREFACE

This book was inspired by my many years of experience as an art therapist working with bereaved children and adolescents. It was born of a desire to help these young people by helping their parents and caregivers find answers to the many questions they have about the grieving process and how it affects their children and teens. The answers to these questions were informed by my own training and experience as well as by my clients and the feelings and experiences they shared with me.

Children of all ages are incredibly perceptive. When there has been a death or a death is impending, on some level they are aware of what they need and of what is going on around them, whether or not they have been informed. These experiences and the emotions that accompany them are life changing and often overwhelming. I have been struck by the trust and willingness of children and teenagers to put so much of themselves into their grief work. Children and teens have found release, understanding, validation, and healing through this process, and on some level they knew it was helpful and perhaps even necessary. I have been greatly moved by their insight, depth of feeling, and awareness.

As an art therapist I have also witnessed the magnificent power of expression. Good memories and positive feelings—such as hope, love, relief, and happiness—are often expressed in children’s art, as are more difficult feelings, such as anger, sadness, guilt, and loneliness. Some images are bold and at times crude expressions of a child or adolescent’s feelings, whereas others are poignant or more subtle expressions of those feelings. The artwork also reflects positive aspects of each child, such as resilience, insight, and a willingness to accept support. Often the artwork says what the client cannot, and then a deeper level of understanding becomes possible. The artwork is a tangible symbol of the experience of grief for each child and teen. But whether a child is creating, writing, playing, or talking, these expressions are opportunities to understand their experience and support them through it.

This book is intended to be a supportive resource for parents, caregivers, and family members who are concerned about the children in their lives. It provides much needed information when there are many questions and little time to research the answers or very little spare emotional energy with which to do so. It addresses questions such as how a child should be included in the experience of death and dying, how to understand a grieving child or teenager’s behavior, what behaviors are often a natural reaction to grief, what to do when there is concern about a child or teen’s behavior, and how to find professional

counseling when it is needed. This book was created to support you as you support your child or teenager. It is intended for any caring adult who is in search of understanding and guidance as they support a grieving child or teen.

The journey through grief is not always clear or direct, but providing a place and time where a child or adolescent can be seen and heard seems to make that journey less isolating and a bit smoother. It is my hope that in reading this book, adults will gain a deeper understanding of how to support their child or adolescent and discern what that child needs most at this time of loss. The path through grief is not a simple journey, but with guidance, support, and trust in your good instincts, you can ensure that your child has the attention and support needed to work through his or her grief.





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# INTRODUCTION

As a child or adolescent attempts to cope with the sudden death of a family member or the terminal illness and eventual death of a loved one, he or she can become overwhelmed by complex and confusing feelings. These feelings may be difficult for a child or teen to identify, understand, or express. This is often a very emotional and stressful time for the adults in a child's life as well. When a parent's emotional resources are taxed, the energy or time needed to research and understand what a child or teen's behaviors mean may not be available. Understanding the connection between events in your family's life and your child or teenager's behavior can be extremely helpful in easing difficult or unwanted behavior. This level of understanding can also help you discern how your child is coping with the stress and emotions related to the loss.

My hope is that this book can make that journey a bit easier by addressing the questions that are often asked about grieving children and adolescents. The answers are based on my many years of experience as a therapist helping families navigate their path through grief as they worked toward gaining support, understanding, and healing.

## **CHAPTER 1—How a Child or Adolescent Learns About Death**

Children and adolescents learn about death in many ways. A child may see a family member struggle with terminal illness, watch that person's health decline, be supported through that process, and perhaps even be present at the death. Another child or teen may be aware of a loved one's illness but be shielded from the experience, excluded from information about what is happening, and therefore be unable to prepare or participate as the family member declines and approaches death. One child or teen may have a chance to say goodbye to their loved one, but another child may not have that opportunity. A teenager may witness a tragic or violent death within a community or bear witness to a national tragedy. A child may have to cope with the death of a classmate, teacher, family friend, or pet and not know where to go for support. She may experience the loss of someone close due to suicide or AIDS (Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome) and feel she cannot talk about the loss.

Whatever the circumstances are, it is certain that when a child or adolescent is faced with the death of someone he or she cares about, whether that death is sudden or expected, that child or teen is affected. This can be a complicated and overwhelming experience.

The manner in which a child or teenager copes with this experience and manages his or her grief is based on many factors. A child's personality and overall character will greatly influence how she responds to the loss and then handles her grief. However, how the people around her are coping can have a significant impact on how the child or adolescent reacts. In addition, the young person may also be affected by the nature of the death and the events surrounding it. Creating the opportunity for grieving children or adolescents to talk and express themselves, have their feelings validated, and to find understanding is a necessary step in moving through the experience of grief. As the child or adolescent begins to integrate the loss, she will begin to move forward and embrace her life once again.

## **CHAPTER 2—Preparing for the Death of a Loved One**

### ***How do I talk about the terminal illness of a family member?***

It is very difficult to tell your children that someone they love is dying. However, providing this information allows your children to ask questions and open up about how this feels to them. Although it is always hard to see your child in distress, expressing feelings is an important part of the grief process. That process begins once it is known that a loved one is dying. During this time, continue to be open and honest about what is happening with the dying family member. There can be significant changes within your home and/or with your loved one. Your family may be exposed to unfamiliar medical terms, medical equipment and medications which may cause some concern or fear in your child or teen and they may have questions. Physical changes are very common with some illnesses and it is helpful when family members can be told about them early on. Weight loss or weight gain is common with some diseases, such as cancer and AIDS. Personality changes can also occur due to the course of the illness or medications being used to treat it. These changes can include expressions of anger, agitation, depression, extreme fatigue, dementia, or disinterest. Preparing your child for the changes that may take place (at least those you know about) can make this transition a bit easier and help him know that it is often a normal part of the disease process. It is also important to let your child know that you cannot predict everything that will happen. Encourage him to ask questions, check in with him periodically, and ask him how he is doing. Even if he doesn't talk then, you are letting him know that you are available if and when he does want to talk.

### ***What is anticipatory grief?***

Anticipatory grief occurs prior to the actual death of a loved one. Anticipating the death of a family member can be anxiety provoking and very stressful. Often the grieving process begins as soon as you hear the loved one's diagnosis and realize that life is going to change forever. As a family member's health begins to decline, the grief process continues to evolve and deepen. It is natural to experience feelings of deep loss as you prepare for and/or witness physical changes in your loved one. As you anticipate and plan for the death of your family member you may grieve all that you have lost so far as well as what this person's death will mean for you and for your family.

Anticipating the decline and death of someone you love is the beginning of the grief process. This process continues to change in intensity and response for each family member, even those who may be less directly involved, such as your child or extended family members. Be aware of how your child is

responding to the reactions of family members and friends. He may be monitoring all that is being said and expressed by the people around him and he may need help understanding what he is hearing and seeing.

### ***How do I prepare my child for the eventual death of a loved one?***

As your family member's condition changes, keep your child informed. Include her in necessary updates so she knows what to expect. If this is difficult for you, perhaps a family member or close family friend can be with you and provide moral support as you talk with your child or teenager. This can be extremely important and helpful, especially if you are feeling stressed, drained, and emotional.

If at all possible, allow your child to say goodbye to your loved one. This is a very important way for all family members to feel a sense of completion. When this is done, there is a sense that what needed to be said has been said, whether it took the form of expressing love or thanks, sharing memories, or even asking for reconciliation. This may make the grieving process easier for your family.

Some deaths are peaceful and others are not. Learn as much as you can about what to expect so you can prepare both yourself and your child. Parents are frequently concerned about how they will react at the time of death and therefore are not sure they want their children to be present. This is a time to trust your instincts about what is best for your child and perhaps to ask your child what he or she would like to do. For some children, it might be important to them that they be present at this time. Other children may decide they do not want to be there. Having added support—such as another family member, close friend, or member of the clergy—available for you and/or your child can be helpful.

### ***What if my child is not able to say goodbye before the death?***

It is not always possible to say goodbye prior to the death, but there are ways that a child, teen, or family can do so even after the death has occurred. Have your child write down her thoughts and feelings—whatever she wanted to say to the loved family member—in a card or letter. Or suggest she draw or paint a picture or express her feelings in any other tangible way she can imagine. Here are several suggestions for what you can then do with these expressions:

- Include them in the casket prior to the burial.
- Tie them to a helium balloon and release the balloon.
- Burn them together in a small family ritual.
- Save them in a journal or memory box.

## CHAPTER 3—When There Has Been a Death

### ***What do I tell my child when there has been a sudden death?***

It is always best to be as direct and honest as possible with your child or teen, even when the death was caused by suicide, violence, war, or other traumatic event. Specific details of the death may not be important to share with your child initially; however, the general circumstances of your loved one's death are very significant and should be shared. It is important to keep in mind how old your child is and how much information is appropriate for someone of her age. Young children will need basic facts explained simply, but they most likely will not need not very much information. Older children and teenagers, on the other hand, may want more information so that they can better understand what has happened. Teenagers generally have more mature coping skills than younger children and therefore can handle more details. Additional information regarding the different types of sudden and traumatic death can be found in chapter 9, *Different Types of Sudden Loss and How They May Impact Your Child*.

### ***What do I do immediately after the death to support my child?***

After the death, set time aside to talk with your child about the circumstances surrounding it. To help her feel more comfortable, choose a familiar or special place to talk. If talking about this is very difficult for you, let your child know that, too.

Be truthful, and explain what happened and why, using simple, direct language. Provide clear facts that your child can understand, being careful not to overload him with too much information. Initially children and teens may only need or want basic information regarding the death. They may not ask for more details until much later. Try to educate and support each child at his own pace, and encourage him to ask questions when he has them.

Encourage your child to express his feelings. Validate those feelings and let him know his emotions are a natural part of grieving. If he seems overwhelmed and unable to manage his feelings, finding a professional counselor to support him and your family can be very helpful at this time.

It is important for your family to talk about this death together. It helps your child or teen know that this is a family experience and that everyone is grieving and feeling the effect of this loss. However, it is also important for your child to understand that each family member may respond differently as they grieve; some may cry or be very sad, some may get angry, others may tell stories, etc. Let your child know it is important to respect the differences in how each family member grieves.

Children and teens may feel responsible for causing or contributing to the death. Tell your child how much you love her, and assure her that she is in no way responsible for this death. Giving her information and encouraging her to ask questions can decrease this possibility.

Inform teachers and school counselors of the loss and ask counselors to establish weekly contact with your child or teen once he or she has returned to school. Many children find it hard to go back to school because of the unknown reactions of classmates and teachers. Counselors and teachers can be helpful in creating a positive transition back to the classroom.

### ***Should my child attend the funeral or memorial service?***

Children and adolescents often do well when they are included in the funeral or memorial service. However, much depends on your child's age and how he is coping with this loss. It is important to explain to your child or teen what to expect during each aspect of the day(s), such as during the viewing, funeral service, burial, reception, or other aspects of this day of remembrance. Talk with your child about how he wants to be involved in the service. Discuss how to interact with visitors and manage their condolences and attention, including what to say in response or how to ask for help from a family member or close friend if they feel overwhelmed. Help them know how to respond to people's condolences and that they may experience people who are crying or very sad, as well as those that do not show any grief and may be laughing or cheerful, which may feel disrespectful. Having a family member or friend available to support your child through all of this can help reduce his confusion and anxiety as well as your concern about him.

As you plan for how to best support your child during the funeral or memorial service, here are some questions to consider:

- Will there be a religious or secular service?
- Will there be a viewing before the funeral and, if so, for how many hours or days?
- If there is a casket, will it be open or closed?
- If there is cremation, will ashes be buried or scattered in a special place?
- Where will the burial take place?
- Does your child or teenager want to participate in the ceremony with a reading, by playing an instrument, or in some other way?
- Does your child want to make pictures or write a story, poem, or letter to be included in the casket or during the burial or?

- What do you expect of your child or teen during each phase of the service (for example, during the viewing, religious service, burial, reception)? Address behavior, social expectations, and how involved she needs to be and plan to have added support available to her if needed.
- Will there be many people your child or teen will know: family, friends, school personnel, or classmates?
- Will there be people attending whom your child or teen will not know but who may know your child, such as business associates, extended family, or neighbors?

It is often very helpful to the grieving adults and to your child to have a friend or family member who can accompany him when you will be less available to him, such as:

- During the service, in case he needs support and comfort or feels the need to leave the service.
- During the viewing. This can be very anxiety provoking and difficult to manage, especially for very young children.
- At the reception after the funeral, especially if there are people he will not know.

***Is there anything I should tell my child's teacher, counselor, or principal when my child returns to school after the death?***

It is important to inform the school of any significant occurrence happening within your family because it has a direct impact on your child. Inform the teacher and the school counselor immediately in the event of a family illness, hospitalization, or death. If a family member is struggling with a serious or terminal illness, it is often very helpful and comforting to your child to have the school counselor informed of the situation. In many schools the counselor is available to your child should he need added support during the school day. This is often possible to arrange in an elementary school and may be more difficult if your child is in middle school or high school.

An older child may be less open to this kind of support. However, let your child know that there is support available at school if she needs it, even if she is not overly receptive to the idea. It is important to inform the school principal, teacher, and counselor of what is happening within your family so that they are aware that your child is coping with a significant life event and may need added support. The teacher(s) can assist your child in transitioning back into the classroom when she returns to school after the death and can let your child know about any missed assignments. Children returning to school after



a death may feel self-conscious, and embarrassed by extra attention. Ask their teacher to treat your child as normally as possible in order to make their return that much easier.

During the first few months after a death in the family, schoolwork often suffers. This appears to be a normal part of the grief process. Concentration as well as motivation can be diminished. Life may be more tense, sad, and difficult at home, which can greatly impact how a child or teen functions in school day to day. When teachers are aware that your child is dealing with a life-changing experience they may be able to provide understanding and some leeway if school becomes a difficult place for your child and/or grades decline. If your child continues to struggle with school, added support may be needed. More than one type of support may be beneficial, such as a tutor to assist your child with schoolwork and support from a professional counselor to address issues of grief or other issues that are affecting your child.

It is important to have a relationship with your child's teacher(s) so you can stay informed of any behaviors or performance changes. Teachers often communicate with parents or caregivers via e-mail and can keep you informed about how your child is doing in their class. Communication with your child's teacher(s) and counselor helps to create a team that is focused on supporting your child in the classroom as well as when they are managing homework.

## CHAPTER 4—Remembering Your Loved One through Ritual

### *Are there other ways we can remember our loved one?*

Many families hold formal memorial services or funerals soon after the death of a family member. These ceremonies often represent merely the beginning of the journey of navigating the many emotions and changes that result from the loss. This process can feel chaotic, unsettling, and scary. Healing and memorial rituals can help to restore a sense of balance in life when a death is devastating and disruptive.

Often, rituals are created for the purpose of remembrance, honoring your loved one, and honoring yourself and your family. Ritual or ceremony can provide meaning to those who have been affected by the death and unite a group of people who are grieving the same loss. In this way rituals can touch us personally and collectively, acting as a unifying force. Oftentimes words cannot touch the depth of our grief, but ritual and the symbols used in ritual can touch those places and help us to express feelings that are beyond words.

There are many ways to include ritual or ceremony in your life to remember and honor your loved one. Rituals of remembrance are symbolic by nature and can be as simple as lighting a candle in memory or they can be more multifaceted. Either way, rituals can become an important part of the healing process. Children and teens can be instrumental in creating meaningful rituals. Include them in deciding how to acknowledge a birthday, anniversary, or other special day. What is most important is that the family decides together how a particular day or moment will be celebrated or acknowledged. It is okay if you decide together that nothing needs to be done.

Simple rituals can include:

- Planting a tree or bush
- Lighting a candle
- Reading a meaningful poem or quote
- Visiting the cemetery (Often people find the gravesite a good place to talk with their loved one or to place flowers or other meaningful items. This can be done as a family or each person can have time alone at the grave.)
- Celebrating a birthday with a cake, balloons, or in some other way
- Setting a place at the table for your loved one on a special day
- Making a toast
- Acknowledging the blessings that have come into your life as a result of this person

## **CHAPTER 5—Providing Support to Your Grieving Child: What You Need to Know**

### ***How do I begin to provide support to my child or teen?***

The process of grieving varies for every child, teen, and adult. Each individual has his or her own style of grieving and his or her own timetable. Family members often do not actively grieve at the same time, so it is not uncommon for family members to take turns grieving and to approach the loss in different ways at different times.

If a parent is actively grieving, a child or teen may unconsciously wait to grieve, knowing that it will be safer to do so later, when his parent is not so consumed by her own grief and therefore unable to provide needed support. However, it also may happen that when a child or teen is actively in his grief and needing a great deal of support, particularly from a parent, that the parent will not have the time or emotional energy to also address her own grief. She may have to put her many feelings on hold until there is time and energy available to address her feelings of grief more deeply and more productively. Sensitivity to these differences will enhance your ability to support your child, teen, or other family member.

What a child or teenager feels when she is grieving may be very similar to what an adult experiences, but how she copes with and expresses these feelings is often markedly different from how an adult does so. A child or teen's reaction to a loss is based in part on where she is in the many aspects of her development. Below are more specifics that will guide you in helping your child cope with this loss.

### ***Nine Things You Need to Know to Help Your Child through the Process of Grieving***

- Grief consists of many feelings, including sadness, anger, shock, isolation, loneliness, fear, guilt, jealousy, confusion, relief, hopelessness, frustration, and intolerance. There are also many behaviors associated with grief, including forgetfulness, distractibility, emotional highs and lows, increased fighting between siblings, physical symptoms, and regression (when a child or teen behaves as they did when they were younger). Adults have these same feelings but may show them in different ways. Help your child or teen understand how adults sometimes behave when they are grieving so he doesn't feel responsible for an adult's anger, distancing, or sadness.
- It is healthy for you and your child to cry together, but you need to continue to be her support. It is not helpful if your child feels that she needs to support you.

- Understand that a child or teen may be reluctant to share her concerns or feelings with you or other adults in the family because she doesn't want to upset anyone.
- A child or teen may find it difficult to put into words what he is feeling and may therefore act out his emotions through his behavior. His actions, behavior, and words will guide you to how he is feeling.
- When under stress, children and teens may regress and behave in ways they did when they were younger. This is not unusual and, when tolerated, usually dissipates in time. If you have concerns about this behavior, consult a professional counselor.
- Encourage your child or teen to attend the funeral or memorial service. Explain beforehand what she should expect so that she is prepared. If your loved one will be buried, ask your child if she wants to view the body in private in order to have a last goodbye. This can be important for children of any age, but a young child in particular often needs this concrete experience to help her understand the permanence of death and will sometimes ask to touch the body. Your child may also want to include cards or drawings in the casket before it is closed.
- If your family member has been cremated, provide a simple explanation of cremation and how the service will be done.
- Depending on your religious views, share your beliefs about life after death.
- Maintain your child's schedule and routine as much as possible, especially after the services are over and visitors have left. This provides a sense of normalcy and consistency that may otherwise be missing from your family's life.

### **Suggestions for Remembering, Grieving, and Moving Forward**

- Talk about the person who died. Recall funny stories, happy and sad memories, and things he or she liked and/or disliked.
- Let your child or teen know it is all right to talk about the unhappy memories.
- Encourage your child or adolescent to keep pictures of her loved one to help her remember that person.
- Try to maintain continuity and a consistent daily routine. The structure is reassuring and helps children feel safer and more secure.
- Encourage your child to continue with his normal activities and to maintain contact with his friends.

- Let your child know that she can still draw pictures for, write letters to, or talk to the person who has died.
- Reassure your child that his loved one can always have a place in his heart.
- Read age-appropriate books to your child about loss and grieving or suggest books for your teen that further illustrate and normalize death and the grieving process (see the appendices for suggested reading lists).
- Help your child or teen understand that life is now different. Assist her in understanding that she may learn many things about herself, her family, and life as a result of this difficult experience. As you begin to redefine your life after this loss, help your child to do the same. Talk about the difficult changes that are taking place and discuss what is going well, too.
- Explain to your child that grief lasts longer than anyone expects and that he may grieve this loss at different times throughout his life, but that with time it usually gets easier.
- Let your child or teen know that you are available to answer questions, to give him a hug, and to remember your loved one.
- Help your child to understand that it is good to laugh, have fun, and feel happy even after someone they loved has died.

***How do I help my child cope with the insensitive things people say or the unkind comments other children make?***

It is customary for adults to offer condolences when there has been a death. Most adults are well intentioned but they often feel awkward and unsure of what to say. Their anxiety or discomfort may cause them to say things that sound insensitive or even ridiculous. This may adversely impact you, your child, or your family. Talk with your child when this happens to help her know how to respond to or manage such comments. Let her know that most of the time people mean to be comforting and supportive even when their words are not. Keeping these statements in perspective can help to minimize their impact on you and your family.

Unlike the comments of adults, however, those made by your child or teen's peers are not always meant to be comforting. Children have been known to say unkind things to other children who have experienced the death of a loved one. Usually this is out of that child's own fear and anxiety and perhaps is an attempt to separate them from the idea of losing someone they love. It can be helpful to explain to your child why a classmate or friend might say something mean. Gaining some understanding of why a peer would say something unfeeling may help her to understand that this is about that child feeling very scared and not about your child's loss. It may be helpful to inform your child's teacher if the incident happened in school and to inform the parents of the offending child so that they are aware of this behavior.

### ***How do I answer questions that don't really have any answers?***

Death is a subject that can conjure many questions that are difficult and sometimes impossible to answer. It is okay to say “I don’t know” to your child. Answers to some questions will be based on your religious or spiritual beliefs, such as, “What happens once some one has died? Where do they go?” Other questions can be more challenging because there is no correct answer. Trusting your intuition can be your best guide.

Here are some questions that grieving children and teenagers ask:

- What if my Dad has a new family in heaven and has forgotten about me?
- How will I grow up right without my Dad here to help me? What if I get messed up?
- Why did my Mom die?
- Does this mean I can die soon, too?
- Can you promise me that you won’t die, too?
- What is going to happen to us now?
- Did my dog go to the same heaven as my grandpa?
- Will my life ever make sense again?
- Will I ever feel good or safe again?
- Will I ever stop crying?

Some questions have more tangible answers than others but may still be challenging to answer. When there has been a death, a child or adolescent often worries about his own well-being and that of his remaining family, especially if the person that died had a parental role in the family. Some of these questions include:

- Can I catch cancer or other illness?
- What will happen to us now? Who will take care of me and do for me?
- Will we run out of money?
- Will we have to move?
- Can you get married so I can have a new mother/father?
- If Grandpa is in heaven can he see everything I do? Does that mean he will get mad if I do something bad?
- Do I need to give up my after-school activities to take care of my siblings or help out around the house?
- What happens to me if you die, too?

### ***What is a contingency plan and why is it important to have one?***

Often, after the death of a parent or parental figure a child or teen may worry about what will happen to him if his surviving parent should die. Although there is no way to guarantee your child that you will not die for a specified period of time, you can reassure him by informing him of your contingency plan—the plan for who would step in to care for your child if anything should happen to you. The thought of your death is scary to your child, but the thought of being alone to manage it compounds that fear. Knowing that, in the event of your death, a loving family member or friend will take care of him and take charge of what needs to be done can be very comforting.

Your child's concerns, worries, and questions may be endless, but welcome them, for when your child is communicating you have the benefit of learning how he feels and what he is worried about and the comfort of knowing that he wants you to hear what he has to say.

### ***What if my child wants to talk about this loss and I don't?***

An important part of grieving is telling others that a loved one has died and to be able to share this significant information whenever it feels right to do so. Telling others about his loss helps a child to address his grief, honor his loved one, and begin to integrate this loss into his life.

Your child most likely will want to talk with you, ask questions, and remember the person they are missing. If this is difficult for you to do, it is important and helpful to find someone close to your child whom he can talk to about what this loss means to him. Explain that this is very difficult for you at this time but that you understand how important it is for him to talk about his memories and feelings.

This is a key time for you to find support and to help you manage your own feelings and reactions as well as the needs of your child. Finding someone who can support you is a key element in supporting your child. A professional counselor is an excellent addition to other help that is offered from family and friends for both you and your child. Counseling provides a place where you can say those things that are difficult to share with people who know you well. A counselor provides you with a place to unburden yourself and receive validation regarding your feelings and reactions. This can fortify you as you care for your child or for others who may be depending on you emotionally.

### ***How does my grief impact my child or teen?***

It is important for your child to know you are grieving and to witness that grief, within reason. By expressing your feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, and loss, you model for your child how to grieve and you give her permission to grieve openly. Expressing your own grief can open up communication within a family, and it makes it more likely that your child will ask you questions about the loss and come to you when she is struggling with it.

However, children do not need to witness the great depth of your grief. It is important to monitor what your children observe and hear. Finding bereavement support for yourself is an excellent way to provide support to your child. If you have a regular time and place where you can unburden yourself of your thoughts, fears, and feelings, then you are more likely to have the energy and emotional capacity to better support your child. She is undoubtedly looking to you for guidance and for the reassurance that she will be taken care of and supported. If your grief goes unchecked or you feel you don't have time to address your grief, you may feel increasingly drained both emotionally and physically. This often leads to feeling tense, edgy, less tolerant, and less available to your child when she needs you. Grieving is an exhausting and difficult experience even when you have support. Having someone advocating for you, validating your experience and your feelings, and reminding you to care for yourself can be tremendously helpful as you find your way through this process.



## CHAPTER 6—Child and Adolescent Development, Related Behaviors, and the Grief Process

### ***Are there common behaviors that I might see in my child, and what do I need to know about them?***

There are a number of feelings and behaviors that are commonly expressed by a child or adolescent who is grieving. All of these feelings and behaviors appear within a spectrum and may be witnessed or expressed at varying levels of intensity, often in keeping with how a child copes under normal circumstances. A child who is generally open and talkative may express his feelings openly, whereas a child that is quiet and keeps her thoughts to herself may be less likely to do so. She may instead experience physical symptoms or even deep sadness because of her difficulty expressing what she is feeling. It is important that your child know that nothing he or she feels is wrong or will be judged. Some of the more common feelings and behaviors experienced by children and adolescents while grieving are listed below.

***Clingy, demanding, needy behavior:*** When a child is clingy or needy he is often having trouble being apart from his parent or loving caregiver. A child may be reluctant or even refuse to leave a parent or other family member for fear something will happen to that person, or to himself. He may be afraid to stay in a room alone and may require more attention than he used to. This often indicates that a child is making an effort to control his environment and parts of his life that now feel out of control. Providing extra support, reassurance, and the physical contact that he needs will help to lessen this reaction over time.

***Anger and hostile behavior:*** Angry feelings can be pronounced or subtle. You may notice that siblings are fighting more or that family members seem more edgy and have less frustration tolerance. Your child may be angry because her loved one died, or she may be angry with the person who died because they left and she feels abandoned.

When anger is turned inward it can become deep sadness or depression, and a child or teen may become lethargic and withdrawn from friends or social activities. Eating or sleeping patterns may also change, or your child may not seem to enjoy his life. You may see one indication of depression or you may see several. When a child or teen becomes this sad or changed, support from a professional counselor is strongly recommended.

Although it is sometimes difficult to cope with, an outward expression of anger means feelings are being externalized and released rather than internalized and held inside. It is important for feelings to be expressed and not withheld. Children may need help in learning how to express angry feelings appropriately, but it is always best when the feelings are seen or heard. Often a child or teen will direct his anger at a parent or adult in a caretaking role. This is usually the person with whom he feels the safest and therefore he feels able to vent deep emotion toward that person. This can be very difficult for the person who is the target of the anger; however, understanding where the feelings are coming from can help in coping with and addressing the angry outburst.

**Guilt:** Children and teens often feel some responsibility for the illness or death of a loved one and therefore feel guilty. A child may not talk about feelings of guilt but will often acknowledge these feelings when asked. A child or teen may feel guilty because he feels responsible for the death in some way (perhaps because he feels he behaved badly, wished things would get easier, or argued with the person at times) or he is experiencing emotions he thinks he should not have, such as anger toward the deceased or toward a family member who is trying to help him. He may feel relief after the death (such as one preceded by a lengthy or difficult illness) or feel happiness and believe he should not experience these feelings. Your child may need you to give him permission to have fun and to enjoy moments where he feels good and feels happy.

**Denial:** A child may deny that a death has occurred or deny that she has feelings about this loss because the emotions she is experiencing are too overwhelming. She may feel unable to cope with the intensity of her feelings or fear that if she starts to cry she will never be able to stop. She may hope that by blocking the emotions she can avoid feeling them. Unfortunately, these emotions usually get expressed in other ways, such as through physical complaints, acting-out behavior, angry outbursts, or depression. If you feel your child is not addressing the death or is not coping with the loss well, find a professional counselor who can support and guide her as she deals with her grief.

**Isolation and loneliness:** Grieving is often a very solitary experience, partly because no one really knows how a grieving person feels or how best to comfort that person. This is especially true for children and adolescents. Their peers often have no experience with death and grief, and if they do they often don't share those experiences easily. As a result, your child may feel that he is very different from his peers and that he doesn't fit in. His perspective on life has most likely changed dramatically and he is realizing that life will never be the same again. Talking with your child can often help to normalize this experience. Discussing what has happened and validating his feelings can provide your child with a chance to talk about what he is experiencing. This may be a good time to seek a grief support group where your child can talk to and

share with other children or teenagers who have also experienced the death of someone they love.

**Jealousy:** This is a very common response to the death of a significant family member. A child or teen can feel very envious of another child who has the family member she has lost. For example, it is a very normal and common response for a child who has lost her father to feel envious of another child whose father is still living. Your child is redefining who she is and how her life is different as a result of her loss and it can be challenging to accept these changes.

**Physical symptoms:** It is not unusual to have physical ailments in relation to emotions. Grief is a very stressful process and can affect a child or teen's immune system, making him more susceptible to colds, viruses, and other ailments. Sometimes physical symptoms occur when a child does not openly express what he is feeling because he finds his experience to be more than he can manage. Common physical complaints include headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, or easily produced injuries that occur during play. In addition to being a manifestation of stress, a physical complaint can also sometimes provide a way to get attention, nurturance, and that extra hug that often helps a child feel better.

**Regression:** When a child or adolescent is stressed, it is common for her behavior to regress and for her to act like she did when she was younger. Often this is an attempt to recapture feelings of security and nurturance and to recreate a simpler, safer time in her life. This is a normal response to stress and is usually temporary. When a child is allowed to regress, she tends to get her needs met and emerges feeling more competent and secure. When a child is not allowed to regress, she may have difficulty expressing feelings of grief because she is confused, overwhelmed, or afraid. Regressed behaviors may include baby talk, wanting to sleep with a parent or older sibling, clinginess, increased fearfulness, bedwetting, tantrums, or temporary withdrawal from peers and/or activities. Usually these behaviors are not cause for concern and tend to diminish as your child feels safer and more assured. If you have concerns about any of these behaviors, or if the regression lasts for an extended period of time, support from a professional counselor can be a positive and productive way to help your child manage her feelings of grief and the related behaviors.

### ***How do I know what my child or teen understands about illness and death?***

Learning where a child or adolescent is developmentally can help adults understand what that child or teen believes about death and how he or she may manage his or her emotions. Below is a general description of how children perceive death at different developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. It is important to remember that not all children will reach the same

developmental stage at the same age. Children may move back and forth between developmental stages, depending on how stressed they are feeling and the support they receive. As a child or teen matures and changes, his understanding and the significance of this loss may also change. The death of a family member sometimes has more impact one to three years after the loss than it does initially, especially for a young child. A child or teen may grieve again and again as he grows and his understanding of death matures. Knowing and understanding where your child is developmentally can help you support your child as he works through his grief. Of course, the best way to learn just what your child is thinking and feeling is to ask, listen, and watch attentively, and let your child be your guide.

### **Developmental Stages of Grief**

***Infancy-2 years:*** Even very young children will respond to a death in the family. A child this age will not understand the concept of death, but he will feel the emotional changes in his home. He may notice increased levels of sadness, anxiety, stress, or emotional distance in his caregivers. Unfamiliar people may be in the home or providing childcare, and the child's routine may be disrupted. A baby may sense the difference when someone holding him is stressed or very sad and he may become agitated or upset in response. As a child becomes older and more interactive he may become more aggressive, lose control, or have a tantrum because he is confused, or fearful or because there have been changes in his home and family.

***2-4 years:*** Children this age often perceive death as temporary or reversible and may ask if the family member is coming back, as though he has gone on vacation. A child may begin to question the concept of death as she becomes aware of the cycle of life in nature, such as when she witnesses the change of seasons or sees a dead animal or insect. Children this age are very concrete and therefore are interested in the concrete aspects of death, such as how the body works or stops working, what it feels like to touch a dead body, or what happens to the body once it has died. It can be unnerving for adults to be asked these questions. However, children at this age learn by asking questions and through repetition and therefore may ask the same questions over and over again.

***4-7 years:*** At this age, as a child matures and begins to understand the cycle of life, his understanding of death deepens. However, young children often believe that the world revolves around them and that they are therefore very powerful, which is often referred to as "magical thinking." As a result, a child may feel responsible for a loved one's death because he believes that he didn't behave well enough, didn't help out enough, didn't pray enough, or thinks he should have been able to do something to change the course of events. Although this may seem illogical to an adult, it is crucial that children who express these thoughts and feelings be heard and be reassured that there

was nothing they could have done, said, thought, or wished that could have caused this family member to die, whether the death was sudden or due to illness. Information shared about the nature of the illness or death needs to be appropriate for this child's age, where they are emotionally, and what they are able to manage.

Children in this age range as well as older children often look out for the welfare of the family, especially a parent's well being, and may become protective of adult family members. A child may try to hide the full impact of his loss in order to protect his loved ones. This is a lot to cope with emotionally, and because his ability to manage his emotions may not be well developed, the child may become overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings and may become more anxious, frightened, and needy for attention and physical comfort.

**7-10 years:** School-age children begin to develop a more complex understanding of death. They generally have better-developed coping skills and are more able to identify and name their feelings than are younger children. They now understand that death is final and will happen to everyone. However, they may monitor their emotions carefully so as not to upset anyone, especially a parent or someone in a caretaking role. A child's understanding of the cause of illness and death, or concepts such as what happens to someone after they have died, may still not be clear, and he or she may need a simple explanation.

While coping with a loss or family illness, a child's behavior at home or in school may change. She may become withdrawn or become needy for attention, or she may express her fear, anxiety, or anger through her behavior. School may become a difficult place to be, and she may forget to do her schoolwork or her concentration in class may suffer. What her friends and peers think of her becomes increasingly important during this period of development; therefore, a child may feel embarrassed by the illness or death of a family member. She may feel it makes her different and that she stands out from her friends and classmates. In reality, most of her peers will not understand what she is going through or know how to respond.

**10-12 years:** Older children continue to understand death more logically and realistically than they once did. It becomes clear to them that everyone dies and therefore death is inevitable. Coping skills of children in this age range are more mature, but a child may still become overwhelmed by his emotions and not manage them well. Children in this age range are beginning to experience both significant emotional and physical changes, which can complicate their ability to manage feelings related to grief and their willingness to ask for support. Peers become more important at this stage of development, and at this age a child may become much more concerned about how he appears to others, which can impact the way in which he grieves. When children grieve it is very common for them to regress and behave as they did when they were

younger, at least some of the time. You may see them be less able to manage their emotions and behavior. For instance, you might see an increase in angry outbursts, tearfulness, increased frustration, and a need for more physical and emotional support than they exhibited before the family member's illness or death.

**13–18 years:** There are many factors that impact how a teen copes with his grief, including the nature and availability of compassionate support, the relationship with the loved one who died, and how mature and effective his coping skills are. The normal work of adolescence is to create a separate identity from parents, siblings, and family. This is often accompanied by conflict with the adults in his life due to misunderstandings, unreasonable requests on both parts, and the need to reject parental figures and align with peers. Teens are often worried about self-image and may become overly concerned with appearing adult and in control. This is often an emotional and trying period that tends to peak and wane in intensity.

When an adolescent is faced with the death of someone he loves—a parent, grandparent, sibling, other loved family member or friend—this process can be intense and overwhelming. He has to navigate the loss of a significant relationship as well as cope with possible unfinished business with the deceased. Feelings of anger, guilt, isolation, and desperation can become difficult to cope with. His need to separate from his parents and strive for independence may cause him to reject parental or adult support at a time when he most needs their comfort. If a teen is not able to voice or express these feelings, or does not have an understanding support system, he can turn to destructive behaviors as a way to mask the pain he is feeling or to punish himself because he feels responsible in some way for the loved one's death. These destructive tendencies can include acting out and risky behaviors such as alcohol or drug use or sexual promiscuity. A teen may turn these feelings inward and become depressed, have suicidal thoughts, or exhibit self-injurious behavior. This can be a crucial time to find a professional counselor to evaluate and support your child.

Adolescents often seek support from peers rather than adults. Friends can become a teen's primary source of identity and emotional support. Having friends who understand and care can be tremendously helpful to a grieving teen. However, the support of a friend may not replace support from a caring and concerned adult. It is important for adults to be very tuned in to their grieving teen. A teenager may push his parent away, refusing to talk or share his pain, but it is important for him to know you are there anyway, willing to talk if he changes his mind. If you have concerns about your child, seek help from a professional counselor.

***Will my child ever stop grieving?***

Special days and life events—such as anniversaries, birthdays, or graduations—may trigger renewed grief in your child. When these feelings are anticipated and acknowledged, the grief is usually less intense and of shorter duration. It is normal and healthy for these feelings to resurface throughout your child's lifetime. When the experience and feelings of grief are addressed early on, a child or teen can learn to integrate the loss into their lives. As a result, they learn, grow, and prepare themselves for future challenges and can live happy, productive lives.

***What does it mean if my child says he or she wants to go up to heaven, too?***

This statement is usually made by young children but sometimes by older children too. It is important to ask your child if she wants to go to heaven to stay with her loved one or if she wants to visit and then come back. Most of the time a child wants to see the person she loves again, but for a visit, not forever. It is rare that a child is expressing thoughts of suicide; however, it is very important to check this out and make sure she is not feeling extreme distress, with serious thoughts of suicide. If you are assured that your child wants a temporary trip to heaven for one more hug or conversation with the person who died, you can validate how other family members may also have that wish even though it isn't possible. This might be a good time to encourage your child to draw a picture or write a letter to her loved one. However, if you are concerned that your child or teen has thoughts of suicide, have her evaluated immediately by a professional counselor to guide you toward the next step in supporting your child and keeping her safe.

## **CHAPTER 7—Defining Relationships and Understanding How They Can Affect the Grief Process**

### ***How does my child's relationship with our loved one impact how he grieves?***

There are many factors that contribute to a child's grief response. How a child or teen reacts and copes with a death has a great deal to do with the relationship he had with the loved one. It is important not to assume how close your child felt to the family member who has died. It is not always possible to accurately define what this person really meant to your child or what your loved one represented to him. Allow your child to be your guide and explain to you what this loss means to him. For example, parents may assume that the death of a grandparent is very significant to their child; however, sometimes it is not. This loss may have much more of an effect on you than it does on your child. Perhaps your child did not have a close bond with the grandparent, or perhaps the grandparent lived far away and did not see your child often, and therefore the death may not impact your child significantly. However, the loss of someone your child felt connected to through a longstanding and close relationship, or even a relationship of short duration (such as a family member who moves in with you to be cared for during the final stages of an illness), may have a significant effect on your child. It is important to talk with your child and allow him to tell you what he finds difficult to manage and where he is coping well.

When a child or teen experiences a loss of any significance, she may become aware of the mortality of the people she loves as well as her own. As a result, a child may tally the losses in her life. It is not uncommon for a child to count the number of deaths that have occurred in her family and to include family members who died before she was born. This seems to illustrate how significant a loss can feel to a child and how the death of a family member can change a child's perspective on her life.

### ***Will a child or teen grieve differently when he or she experiences the death of a sibling, parent, grandparent, or other loved one?***

There is no definitive description of how different losses will affect anyone in a family. Each family member is different in how they communicate, relate to each other, and grieve. However, it is likely that the death of a sibling will be felt and experienced very differently than the loss of a mother or father, and that the loss of a parent will be very different than the death of a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or friend. The role of the loved one in your child's life is often a key ingredient in defining how deeply he will be affected by the death. The



reaction of other family members after a death also directly impacts a child or teen and may set the stage for how open or guarded your child will be in expressing his grief.

**Loss of a sibling:** The loss of a child is incredibly devastating to any parent and family. While the surviving child must deal with the death of his sibling, he often also has to manage significant changes in his parents' ability to cope and support him emotionally. Routines often change, and so does life as he once knew it. Although these changes can be true after any loss, the death of a child seems to reverberate through a family like no other. Children have recalled the sense of the house being "so quiet all the time," unlike ever before. Parents often struggle to get back on track and to resume daily activities. They often have another child or children to care for, but this can be extremely difficult due to their intense grief. The surviving child may flounder or take on a parental role, caregiving for a parent who appears unable to take care of things. Navigating life after the death of a child is often a critical time to find support from a professional counselor for your child(ren) and for yourself.

**Death of a parent or parental figure:** A child's role—in terms of her responsibilities, routines, and the expectations of others—may change after any loss. However, the death of a parent often causes the surviving parent to take on many of the duties and responsibilities of the parent who has died and this impacts children's roles in unique ways. These changes can be numerous and the adjustment can be tough. They often result in children or teens having increased responsibility within the home, such as cooking or cleaning or caring for younger siblings. The shifting parental roles have other effects on the children as well. There may be less time available with the surviving parent due to the increased responsibilities of single parenthood, or a parent that did not work may have to return to the workforce after the death. How the surviving parent copes with this loss and the many subsequent changes will directly influence how a child or teen copes and grieves. There can be a significant period of adjustment for each family member. Seeking professional counseling during this transition can be very helpful for any child or adolescent and the surviving parent.

**Death of a grandparent or extended family member:** The death of a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or someone who is close and directly involved with a family can affect a child in multiple ways. Many children are being raised or directly supported by a grandparent or other family member. That person's death may then be experienced in the same way that the death of a parent would be. This death may impact a child or teen's daily routine or responsibilities at home and therefore may be experienced as a deep and significant loss. For family members who are loved but have been less involved in your child's life, the reaction may be less intense. Again, remember that the significance of a loss can never be assumed. Talk to the child or teen about what this loss has meant to him or her.

**Death of a friend, teacher, or classmate:** The death of a friend, classmate, current or former teacher, or other school staff member can be devastating to a child or teen and can send aftershocks throughout the school, even to those who didn't know the person who died. It is important to address this death with your child even if she didn't know the person who died, because she may feel the impact anyway. Initiating a conversation with your child may provide her with necessary information and give her a chance to ask you questions that she may not have brought up otherwise.

If a classmate has been ill, then the class is usually aware of that fact and possibly has made cards or drawings or reached out as a class in some other way. Despite this, the death may still come as a shock. When a child or teen dies suddenly, the school may be in shock for some time. If a teacher dies, the whole school may feel this loss. The impact will affect other school personnel as well as the children, so talking with your child, listening, answering questions, comforting, and validating her feelings are paramount. When someone close to your child's age dies it can shatter any illusions she had regarding her own immortality or her basic sense of trust in the world. She may become acutely aware of her own vulnerability and feel frightened or depressed.

If your child knew the classmate or adult who died, you may suggest that she attend the funeral. By doing so she can join with peers who are also grieving this loss and actively say goodbye. Attending the funeral may seem less appropriate if your child did not know the person who died, but it is still important to talk with her about this death and how it is impacting her or other children or teachers at her school. The impact on your child or teen may not be great in this instance, but unless you talk with her and observe her closely you have no way of knowing.

**Death of a pet:** The death of a pet can be devastating to a family and in particular to a child or teen. The unique relationship that often exists between a child and a dog, cat, or other animal is unlike any other a child may have. Pets can be constant companions who offer love unconditionally day after day. Pets don't ask much of a child, but are happy just to be around him, to play, and to cuddle.

After a child has experienced the death of a loved one, the death of a pet can be confusing and even overwhelming. The feelings of grief for both the family member and the pet may be difficult to separate. A child may focus more on the loss of the pet than on the death of a loved one, often because it is easier to cope with the feelings related to a pet. This is a natural response and, as long as feelings of grief are being expressed, the focus of the feelings are less important. It may be your child or teen's way of coping with the grief in a more manageable way.

Whether your child is grieving the death of a loved one and a pet or just the loss of a loved pet, it is important to reassure your child or teen that what he is feeling about his pet is normal and reasonable. These feelings need to be acknowledged and validated. Consider whether you will have your pet cremated or if you will bury it and, if so, where. Holding a short ceremony can be a wonderful way to honor your pet, express what he meant to each of you, and help your child formally say goodbye. It is always helpful to talk about your pet and tell stories about him, much the same way you would about other loved family members who have died.

A major difference between the death of a pet and the death of a family member is that pets are often replaced. Be careful to allow enough time to pass before getting a new pet. It is important for family members to experience the loss and grieve for the pet that has died. It is very likely that you and/or your family will want a new pet, and that is natural and often a good idea, as long as there has been enough time to grieve and honor the deceased pet.

## CHAPTER 8—Outside Factors that Influence How Your Child Copes with Loss

### ***How do previous losses, cultural and religious beliefs, our support system, or other people’s grief impact how my child copes with this death?***

There are many factors that contribute to how a child, teen, or adult adjusts and copes with the death of a loved one. Some of these factors are described below.

**Family members:** The way in which other family members cope with a loss can directly impact your child. When other family members are struggling with a death, a child may feel she cannot share or show her feelings openly. A child or adolescent can become very protective of his family’s feelings and work hard to manage his own emotions alone so as not to burden other family members. Messages conveyed by the manner in which a family grieves can also influence the way in which a child grieves. Sensing that it is best not to talk will likely encourage a child or teen to remain quiet. This can sometimes complicate his ability to address his own feelings regarding the death and his relationship with the person who has died. Family members who express their feelings more openly and appropriately become good role models for effective ways to express emotion.

**Previous losses:** When a child or adolescent has experienced a prior loss it can complicate or make grieving the current loss more difficult. It is natural that feelings for the previously deceased loved one may surface and intensify the grief the child or teen is currently experiencing, especially if that death was not addressed effectively when it occurred. However, if a child was well supported during the previous loss, she may have acquired helpful coping skills that may serve her as she deals with her current grief. Naturally, she will also need the support of her family as she faces this new loss.

**Support system:** Every child needs a support system as he grows and matures, and many parents and caregivers are very good at providing the love and emotional foundation their children need. However, when a family is stressed by a loved one’s illness, care, or death, caregivers sometimes don’t have the necessary emotional and/or physical resources to support their children. During such times, it is critical that other forms of support are put into place.

Children are resilient and adaptable, but they are also very sensitive, tuned in to all that is going on in their environment, and very reactive to these circumstances. A parent or caregiver's ability to be open and honest with a child or teen provides an opportunity for that child to come forward with questions and concerns, establishing open communication. Parents need to understand that emotions are often more easily expressed through a child's behavior rather than verbally. Gaining insight into how your child's behavior may be influenced by what he is experiencing at home may help you talk with him and help him understand the connection between what he is feeling and how he is behaving.

There are many possible resources through which to find help for your child, teen, or family. Often assistance is available from your child's school counselor, from your faith community, and from extended family members and friends. However, when there are significant concerns about how your child or teen is coping, seeking help from a professional counselor is an excellent way to support your child and your family. Providing a back-up support system for your child provides added support for you as well.

***Integrating cultural and religious beliefs:*** A family's cultural traditions and/or religious beliefs directly impact family members' experiences of loss and grief. The way in which children are told of a loved one's illness or death and how involved they are allowed to be in that process will impact how they cope. Certain cultures feel that children should not be informed about the details of a dying loved one's circumstance, including information about their illness, the fact that they are dying, or information related to the death. It is often thought that children are protected in this way. More and more, American culture is embracing the belief that being open and direct with children and involving them in the dying process as much as is appropriate helps them to cope better with the family member's illness and/or death. However, this is sometimes in direct conflict with the beliefs within other cultures. When cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices are well established in the life of a child or adolescent, the child often becomes a bridge between the culture in which she is being raised and the American culture in which she functions and interacts outside of her home. She may be trying to integrate very different lifestyles, belief systems, and perspectives as she manages her loss. When a child or teen becomes the connection between her parents' culture and the culture in which she lives, she may have to straddle the expectations and beliefs of both cultures, which can be confusing and may complicate her understanding of what is expected of her, what is expected from her, and how she grieves. It is important to acknowledge these issues with a child or teen and to help them navigate the cultural differences they may be experiencing during the illness or death of a loved one.

### ***What if the relationship with the family member was conflicted?***

Unfinished business between the deceased and a surviving child or teen can lead to a series of complications if these issues are not addressed soon after the death. This is common when a teen loses a parent, parental figure, or a sibling. Developmentally it is normal for there to be conflict between a parent and a teenage child. However, if there is no resolution prior to the death, the teen can harbor anger, regret, guilt, and a sense of responsibility for the difficulties. These feelings can be directed toward the deceased, toward surviving family members, or toward himself. It is very important to address these issues if this situation occurs. Seeking professional counseling at this time can help your child or adolescent gain perspective and objectivity on the situation so that he can work through the conflict and find some resolution.

## CHAPTER 9—Different Types of Sudden Loss and How They May Impact Your Child

***How do I support my child if the death was due to an accident, illness, violence, or a result of war?***

***Sudden loss by illness or accident:*** The period of shock and adjustment after a sudden death is often much longer than with an anticipated death. The shock and the denial that this really happened is often initially overwhelming and even paralyzing. Children and adolescents may have great difficulty accepting the reality of a sudden loss, and young children in particular may feel that the family member is gone temporarily and will return. A young child may have difficulty understanding the concept of permanent loss and may need the simple facts repeated again and again before the death begins to make sense to her.

***Suicide:*** When a loved one commits suicide it often generates intense feelings of responsibility, guilt, and helplessness for each member in a family. Death by suicide often leaves family members with many unanswered questions, such as:

- What did I do wrong?
- Didn't they love me enough to keep living?
- Wasn't I important enough to stay alive for?
- I should have known something was so wrong. Why didn't I?
- I should have seen the signs that things were so bad. How could I have missed them?

If you are dealing with a suicide in your family, it is important for you to let your child or teen know that there was nothing that he or she could have done to cause this death or prevent it. The circumstances can be difficult to discuss, but it is important that your child be told the truth about the nature of the death. The details do not need not be discussed at length; however, if your child asks questions about this loss, it is important that those questions be answered as honestly as possible.

Unfortunately there are times when a child is the one who finds the family member who completed suicide. This is a devastating and traumatizing experience and warrants that counseling for your child and family begin very soon after the death.

Your child may have many questions about suicide and about the death in your family. It is important for her to know the following:

- Children and teenagers often feel that if there has been a suicide in the family then they are genetically determined to commit suicide. If your child has this concern, assure him that suicide is not inherited.
- Clinical depression, or deep sadness, is often the reason a loved one may have felt that suicide was the only way to deal with his problems. It usually indicates a quiet desperation that he felt had no other solution.
- There is always a better solution to a problem than suicide.

**Violent death:** A death due to violence is usually sudden and therefore a terrible shock to a family. The death of a loved one by murder or other violent means can shake a child's foundation, and the child may begin to see the world as dangerous, threatening, or at best unsafe. A child who lives with violence around him may become used to random and unnecessary deaths, but he will likely still be overwhelmed and shocked when it happens to someone in his family. Complicating the process of grieving and trying to reconcile and integrate this loss is the involvement of law enforcement, and often the court system and the media. Investigation of the death and prosecution of those responsible can last for years, prolonging and sometimes intensifying the impact the death has on a child or teen. This can make it very difficult to move forward.

There are often unanswered questions such as why the crime was committed, who committed it, and whether or not it will be dealt with justly. A child or teen who witnessed the crime, or who knows details of the death, may have a number of reactions, which can include having flashbacks, bad dreams, night terrors, thoughts of retaliation, and excessive anger or fear. The reactions can be intense and long lasting. This can be traumatic for a child or teenager and requires support by a professional counselor.

**Death due to war:** A death during wartime presents very specific challenges for a child or teen and his or her family. Your loved one's death has probably occurred in a distant place and he has most likely been away from home for an extended period of time. Your child may have had many concerns since your loved one left home about the imminent danger he might be in. She may have asked him to promise that no harm would come to him and she may feel betrayed by him after his death or imagine that she is responsible for the death in some way.

Learning or assuming that the death was caused by violence may generate many questions. Your child may need to understand the reason for this loss, or learn the details of the death so that she can more fully comprehend what has happened. She may experience difficulty accepting or understanding the loss because of the many unanswered questions and the nature of the death. During this time she may be interested in watching news programs in an effort to gather information. Be sure to limit what your child is exposed to. Too much



graphic information can make this process more scary and difficult to manage.

Losing a parent or loved one often prompts a child or adolescent to try to make sense of the death and give it meaning. Was my father protecting our country and our safety? Did he do the right thing or did he die in vain? There is a great deal of honor and distinction associated with serving in the United States Military and your child or teenager may find some comfort in that. However, there may be strong feelings about your loved one's choice to be in the armed services or the government's choice to engage in war. Despite how you and your child feel, your family may be faced with other people's reactions and opinions about the war. Keeping communication open within your family may help you and your child cope with differences in opinion or feeling a need to defend your loved one's choices.

Some children may be isolated from others who have suffered a loss as a result of war, whereas other children may live in a community heavily populated with military families and therefore have regular contact with peers who have lost or will lose a family member due to war. There are challenges in both circumstances. Making sure that your child has the support she needs is critical at this time.

Military children and families must cope with issues that are often unique to the military. There is the possibility of having to deal with media coverage of your loved one's death; or knowing other soldiers who have died and their families who are in a similar situation as your family; or experiencing the formality and ritual of a military funeral. Your family's identity as a military family may change, and with that loss is the need to acclimate to civilian life. This may include moving; transferring to a new school; and the loss of friends, group activities, support systems, and/or a place of worship.

Every child or teenager who experiences a loss due to war may react differently and uniquely. There may be a greater need for support when there are other children, teens, and families who have had a loved one die in war, especially if your families knew each other. Check in with your child frequently and ask her how she is managing. Provide opportunities for her to share her thoughts and feelings. Let her know she is not expected to take this loss "in stride," but instead is encouraged to express her feelings, thoughts, fears, and concerns openly. This may be an excellent time to find a professional counselor for your child and family as you each adapt to the many changes you are facing. Remember that one of the best ways to support and care for your child is to get the support and care you need for yourself.

### ***What is disenfranchised grief and how can it affect my child?***

Grief is considered disenfranchised when the death of someone you love and care about goes unacknowledged because it is considered unimportant or socially unacceptable. Attitudes of society or the views of family, friends,

neighbors, or someone close may greatly impact the process of grieving. A child may be considered too young to be affected by a death and therefore too young to grieve. Some relationships are not valued or considered to be close enough to have a significant effect on a person, such as in the death of a life partner, friend, neighbor, coworker, teacher, child care provider, pet, or when the loss is because of a miscarriage. The social stigma related to the nature of a death may make it unacceptable or shameful to grieve openly. Circumstances related to a death therefore can alienate a grieving adult, child, or teen from their community. Deaths that are often attached to shame or social stigma include death as a result of AIDS, suicide, murder or other violent death, and alcohol- or drug-related deaths.

The cause of death, the nature of the death, or factors surrounding the death can complicate the grief process or cause a delay in grieving. A child, teen, or family grieving a disenfranchised death may have to cope with social stigma, embarrassment, secrecy, absence of mourning rituals, delayed grief, economic and/or legal problems, and emotional problems. Support commonly is not offered and therefore the grief cannot or is not shared with anyone outside of the family. Professional support is recommended for any child and family coping with the difficult, stressful, and complicated aspects of a loved one's death that has been unacknowledged or stigmatized.

## CHAPTER 10—When to Find Professional Support for Your Child or Adolescent

### *How do I know when my child needs help?*

Any time you instinctively feel that your child is struggling is a good time to find added support for your child or for your family. This may be during a family member's illness or after the death of a loved one. There are many professional counselors who have experience working with grief and loss and can support your child and your family. If you are unsure if your child needs counseling, it can be helpful to call a therapist and discuss your concerns over the phone. A therapist can provide guidance as to whether or not an assessment of your child is indicated.

Some common indicators that your child or teen may need added support include the following:

- He denies that he has feelings regarding this loss.
- He has great difficulty talking about the person who died.
- He had a difficult relationship with the person who died.
- He feels responsible for the illness or death.
- He exhibits significant distraction in school and/or has a prolonged decline in grades.
- There are notable changes in his eating or sleeping habits.
- There are significant changes in his personality.

There are times when support is critical. Any kind of extreme behavior is a red flag and should be addressed by a professional counselor immediately. Red flag behaviors include:

- Talk or threats of suicide
- Depression
- Destructive acts toward people, property, or animals
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Impulsive or reckless behavior
- Significant decline in schoolwork

- Phobia about attending school or frequent truancy
- Frequent expressions of anxiety or panic
- Unwillingness to socialize; withdrawal from family, friends, or activities

Children and adolescents will often avoid telling adults how much they are hurting and struggling, sometimes in an effort to shield them from this knowledge. It is therefore important to continue to observe your child or teen's behavior, emotions, and reactions following a death. Check in with her weekly or even daily and ask how she is doing. Even if she doesn't talk with you, she knows you care and are available if she needs you. If at any point you have concerns, seek assistance from a professional counselor.

## CHAPTER 11—How to Find a Professional Counselor for Your Child, Adolescent, or Family

### *How do I find a professional counselor who will be good for my child, my teenager, or for my family?*

There are several different types of professional counselors who can provide therapeutic support for your child or adolescent. When choosing a counselor, there are important things to consider and questions to ask. If you are looking for someone to address bereavement issues and associated behaviors, a licensed professional counselor (LPC), licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), registered and board-certified art therapist (ATR-BC), registered play therapist (RPT), or licensed clinical psychologist (PhD) may be the best place to start. A therapist with any of these credentials has earned a master's degree or PhD in her field and is either licensed, board certified, and/or registered.

A professional counselor can assess your child and guide you in choosing what kind of treatment would be most helpful at this time. Counseling sessions will be more productive and helpful if you find a therapist with whom your child can develop a good relationship. If he feels understood by a therapist, your child is more likely to open up and share his thoughts, concerns, and feelings. Sometimes family therapy is an effective way to address issues that are affecting the whole family, which is often the case when a family has experienced a death. Family therapy can be done in lieu of individual therapy or in conjunction with individual therapy.

When choosing a counselor it is helpful to interview several practitioners, either by phone or by making appointments with each of them. It is often very possible to get a sense of a therapist's personality and style through a phone conversation, and this provides an opportunity to ask her some important questions about her experience, background, and approach.

Questions to consider asking when selecting a counselor include:

- How long have you been a therapist?
- How many years of experience do you have working with children/teens?
- How many years of bereavement experience do you have and has this been with children and teens?
- Do you have other ways to engage a child or adolescent besides talking, such as art therapy, play therapy, sand tray therapy, etc?

- I know sessions with children are confidential, but how much information is shared with the parent or caregiver?
- How much guidance can I expect in terms of supporting my child or teen?

### ***How do I find a counselor in my community?***

- Referrals from people you know can be a very good way to find a good counselor/therapist. However, there are other resources, too.
- Pediatricians often have a referral list of therapists, psychiatrists, and psychologists who work specifically with children and adolescents.
- Contact your local hospice for referrals to counselors who specialize in bereavement.
- School counselors often have referral lists for therapists.
- Your insurance carrier will very likely have a list of therapists with whom they contract.

Interviewing therapists will be beneficial in helping you find a good match for your child or your family. Counselors want to help and are usually very willing to answer your questions. If you find a therapist who doesn't have any openings, ask her for the names and numbers of other counselors that she recommends.

## **CHAPTER 12—Types of Bereavement Support: Individual Counseling, Support Groups, and Weekend Camp**

Individual counseling is often a good place to start when support is indicated. It provides your child or teen with an opportunity to address her loss one on one in a safe, confidential environment. Individual counseling provides a child or teen with a place and time where she can express herself openly and privately, address issues she might not otherwise approach, and find validation. As she works through her feelings and concerns she may see that much of what she is feeling and thinking is normal. The therapist can also act as a liaison between a child and parent, first providing a parent with education about normal grief and then more specifically about how her child is functioning and how the parent can best support her child.

Grief support groups provide an opportunity for grieving kids to see that they are not alone, especially because grieving can be such an isolating experience. It is important, however, that any child or teen joining a group be emotionally prepared to do so. It is recommended and often a stipulation that there be at least three months between the loved one's death and a child or teen joining a group so that the experience is not overwhelming or too difficult. A child or adolescent must be prepared to share her story and work on her own issues of grief and also be prepared to listen to other group members' stories, feelings, and memories. It is in the sharing that a great deal is learned and connections are made. However, it can be quite challenging to listen to other people's stories if one's own loss is too recent.

Just like individual sessions, group sessions are confidential. Outside the sessions, participants may talk about their own experience but not those of other group members. This helps to ensure that the group environment is a safe and private one, where anything can be shared.

Groups generally meet every week, every other week, or once a month and run for six or eight weeks. However, some groups are open-ended and run indefinitely, with new members joining and other members graduating periodically. Each group is usually created with a small age range so that children and teens are with their peers or group members close in age. Sometimes groups are scheduled concurrently so that children, teens, and adults can participate in their own peer groups but at the same time. This is a very effective and comprehensive approach to group. Support is provided for family members simultaneously and can be a catalyst for opening up discussion within a family. Family members generally address similar issues each week, making it more possible for them to share their group experiences with each other.

### ***What is grief camp and is it appropriate for my child?***

Grief camp provides another arena in which children and teens (and in some programs adults) can spend the weekend with peers who have had similar experiences and feelings. Most camps pair each child and teen with an adult volunteer for the entire weekend. This volunteer is screened, trained, and prepared to be a companion, assistant, friend, confidant, and helper throughout the weekend. Again it is recommended and often required that there be at least three months between the family member's death and attending camp. Like group, camp participants must be able to tolerate listening to other campers' stories, feelings and memories. This can be challenging during the course of a weekend, but also extremely beneficial. The adult volunteers are there to assist your child or teen if he struggles emotionally during any part of the weekend. Group discussion, art therapy, music therapy, and many types of recreation are often a part of the program. A range of recreational activities is offered to encourage team building, self-confidence, and connection. These weekends combine time for a child or teen to talk and learn about his grief as well as opportunities to make new friends, laugh, and have fun. These weekends tend to be very productive, helpful, meaningful, and enjoyable.



## **CHAPTER 13—The Grieving Process as an Opportunity for Growth**

It is difficult to see your child in distress and to know that sometimes there isn't much that can be done. Your child needs to work his way through his grief just as you do. Although your experience with grief may be very different from your child or teenager's experience, the same feelings and sensations can be experienced by anyone.

Grief is a slow, often painful, and difficult process, but there is a great deal that can be learned when a child or teen addresses his grief consciously and has the support he needs during that time. In working toward integrating this loss into his life, a child or adolescent often has opportunities to see life from a different perspective, gain insight and understanding about himself, discover personal strengths that he was not aware he possessed, and grow beyond where he was when the death first occurred. Learning productive and useful coping skills can help him as he copes with this loss and as he matures and encounters other challenges. This does not mean that your loved one is forgotten or that your child will no longer grieve; however, in reconciling this loss and integrating all that has changed in his life and all that he has learned, your child can continue to move forward toward healing and living a happy, productive life.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

### FOR CHILDREN

Brown, L. and Brown, M. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*. NY: Little, Brown & Co.

Gently and directly addresses children's fears and curiosity about death.

Buscaglia, L. (1982). *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. NJ: Slack, Inc.

The story of life and death, related beautifully through the changing seasons.

Dr. Seuss. (1996). *My Many Colored Days*. NY: Alfred Knopf.

Relates colors to feelings in a fun and understandable way.

Hanson, W. (1997). *The Next Place*. MI: Waldman House Press, Inc.

An inspirational journey to a destination without barriers and a celebration of life.

Halevi, M. (1997). *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*. NY: Pitsopany Press.

This book explains the Jewish mourning practices. The introduction details steps parents can take to help their children through the bereavement process.

Krementz, J. (1988). *How It Feels When a Parent Dies*. NY: Knopf.

A collection of photo-essays with thoughts and feelings of eighteen children, ages 7–16, who have lost a parent.

Kroll, V. (1995). *Fireflies, Peach Pies and Lullabies*. NY: Simon and Schuster.

In this honest and healing story, a young girl encourages family and friends to remember her great-grandmother and celebrate her life.

Mellonie, B. and Ingpen, R. (1983). *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*. NY: Bantam.

Addresses the cycle of life by describing the beginnings, endings and life span in different parts of nature and with people

Mills, J. C. (1993). *Gentle Willow*. NY: Magination Press.

A tender story that addresses feelings of sadness, love, disbelief, and anger related to illness and death.

Modesett, J. (1992). *Sometimes I Feel Like a Mouse: A Book About Feelings*. NY: Scholastic Inc.

Simply addresses feelings of a young child and animals that relate to those feelings.

Thomas, P. (2001). *I Miss You, A First Look at Death*. NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

This picture book explores the death of someone loved in a sensitive way with a simple and realistic description of the feelings related to grief.

Varley, S. (1984). *Badger's Parting Gifts*. NY: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books.

This wonderfully illustrated book is about the death of someone very special and how his friend's memories of him help them with their grief.

## **FOR ADOLESCENTS**

Blume, J. (1981). *Tiger Eyes*. NY: Bradberry Press.

The touching story of a teenage girl who loses her father suddenly and her attempt to cope with this loss.

Gootman, M. E., Ed. (1994). *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing*. MN: Free Spirit Publishing

Includes quotes from teens about what they're going through, followed by some helpful comments, explanations. Good for group discussions.

Grollman, E. A. (1993). *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers*. MA: Beacon Press.

A simple book with explanations and suggestions.

Hanson, W. (1997). *The Next Place*. MI: Waldman House Press.

An inspirational journey of awe and wonder to a destination without barriers and a celebration of life.

Krementz, J. (1981). *How it Feels When a Parent Dies*. NY: Alfred A Knopf.

A collection of photo-essays with thoughts and feelings of eighteen children, who have lost a parent.

Paterson, K. (1997). *Bridge to Terabithia*. NY: Harper & Row.

A beautifully written story about how a boy faces the tragic death of his best friend.

Sims, A. M. (1988). *Am I Still a Sister?* NM: Sims Publications.

An eleven-year-old sister tells the story of her brother's death, how she worked through her grief, and how her brother will always be a part of her.

Smith, D. B. (1988). *A Taste of Blackberries*. NY: Harper & Row.

An honest and sensitive story about the death of a boy's best friend and how he faces this tragedy.

## **FOR ADULTS**

- Campbell, S. and Silverman, P. (1987). *Widower: When Men Are Left Alone*. NY: Prentice Hall.
- Golden, T. R. (2000). *Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing*. MD: Golden Healing Publishing.
- Grollman, E. A. (1977). *Living When a Loved One Has Died*. MA: Beacon Press.
- Kohn, J. B. and Willard K. (1978). *The Widower*. MA: Beacon Press.
- Lindsay, R. (1987). *Alone and Surviving*. NY: Walker & Co.
- Loewinshohn, R. J. (1979). *Survival Handbook for Widows*. Chicago: Follett Publishing Co.
- Rando, T. (1988). *Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*. NY: Lexington Books.
- Rando, T. (Ed.). (1986). *Loss and Anticipatory Grief*. NY: Lexington Books.
- Stearns, A. K. (1984). *Living through Personal Crisis*. NY: Harper Books.
- Worden, J. W. and Uline, A. (1989). *Surviving the Loss of a Loved One*. NY: Random House Audio Books.

## **FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS**

- Fitzgerald, H. (1992). *The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide*. NY: Fireside.
- Grollman, E. A. (1976). *Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child*. MA: Beacon Press.
- Grollman, E. A. (1996). *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. MA: Beacon Press
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**Jean McCaw, MA, ATR-BC**, is a registered and board certified art therapist who has been practicing in the Washington DC Metropolitan area for over 25 years. Her experience with children, adolescents and adults includes issues related to grief and loss as well as the impact of serious chronic and life threatening illnesses. For more information regarding *Touching Grief, Frequently Asked Questions About Child and Adolescent Grief*, Contact Ms. McCaw at [TouchingGrief@gmail.com](mailto:TouchingGrief@gmail.com).