

## **HELPING CHILDREN WITH DEATH**

Telling children about the death of someone close is the beginning of a long process of sharing. Like adults, children differ widely in their reactions to death. However, unlike adults, children's mental capacities are different. Understanding how children at different ages perceive death may help parents and caregivers as they nurture surviving children.

**INFANTS AND TODDLERS** can sense the feelings of those around them. Infants suffering the loss of a mother will need a replacement primary caregiver as soon as possible. This caregiver should be consistent. Older infants may exhibit anger, crying, searching, lack of appetite and finally quiet resignation in response to the loss of a mother or primary caregiver. The infant or toddler will need lots of holding, stroking and cuddling. Words will not be understood.

**AGES FOUR TO SIX** – A child of this age has a very limited and literal understanding of death. Thinking is very concrete. Death may best be explained in physical terms, "His heart stopped beating and no one could make it start again. We won't be seeing him anymore. We will bury his body in the ground because he isn't able to do or say anything anymore." They will need lots of reassurance that a loved one did not choose to leave them but that there was a specific cause of death. Because these children have a limited concept of time, they may expect the deceased to be alive again soon. They feel the need to tell the story of the death over and over in an effort to get some mastery over it. They may ask many questions that will need thoughtful responses and they will act out their fear and confusion through play. After a death these children have an increased need for loving care and may regress, temporarily, to bedwetting or fears of separation.

**AGES SEVEN TO ELEVEN** – Younger children in this age range may become fearful of death because they understand that it is real, and may wonder who will be the next to die. They may ask what happens after death and may express anger toward whomever or whatever they feel may have caused the loss. Seven and eight year olds may also believe that their thoughts caused the death. This magical thinking may lead to guilt feelings. They need to be told that they did not cause the death and that the dead person did not choose to die. A more adult concept of death

develops between ages nine and eleven. Children can now think abstractly and understand what a loss may mean to another person. Having a chance to be helpful to others during the crisis may help them to deal with their own feelings.

**ADOLESCENTS – (AGES 12 – 16)** – Young adolescents often reject their parent's standards and may feel very guilty when a parent dies. School performance will often reflect this stress. Older adolescents (ages 14 – 16) have a stranger sense of identity and are not as self-centered but may still turn to thoughts of their own death when faced with the death of another. Some adolescents may exhibit aggressive behavior and the need for revenge. They need help finding appropriate ways to express their anger and rage. Because adolescents form closer relationships with peers, they should have groups available to them to share with other young people who have suffered a loss. It is normal for adolescent to reach out to someone beyond the family.