

BEREAVEMENT ~ THE CHILD IN HIS/HER FAMILY

The emotional health of children cannot be understood independently of their families. They depend on the adults in their lives (and often their siblings too) for their survival needs and also for the nurture which helps them to grow into functional and happy adulthood. When things are going well, the child:

- ~ becomes progressively more independent and more self-sufficient.
- ~ receives the necessary stimulation for physical and cognitive growth.
- ~ experiences the positive reinforcement that promotes self-esteem.
- ~ is taught to respect limits in ways which lead to pro-social behavior.
- ~ and is able to feel safe and cared for.

Yet this is far from the reality experienced by many children in our society. The family unit may not be stable, the basic needs of the family may barely be met and the adults may be too preoccupied with their own survival to give their children the priority and the consistent attention which they need. When someone dies, family functioning may be stressed to breaking point. Not only are there often changes in the family's ability to respond to the child's basic needs, but the child faces additional challenges in trying to understand the nature and the implications of death. Some of these difficulties may include unanswered questions such as:

- ~ did I somehow cause the death?
- ~ will I die too?
- ~ perhaps my other parent will die, then who will care for me?
- ~ why did this person die? is it because s/he was a bad person?
- ~ is God angry with my family?

Often children are unable to put their feelings into words and they act them out instead. Grieving or worried children may:

- ~ distract themselves through an increased level of activity.
- ~ have difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- ~ "act out" at school.
- ~ often seem inappropriate when they turn to play for comfort.
- ~ exhibit high levels of egocentricity in response to threats to their security.
- ~ act "bossy" in the classroom or play-yard.
- ~ develop sleep disturbances or fears.
- ~ become withdrawn from activities and from their peers.
- ~ exhibit regression in many areas of their functioning.

It can be very hard for children to ask family members the questions which worry them most. Counselors and teachers are often the people with the best opportunities to create a safe place where children can talk about their fears. Factors which help children cope include:

- ~ finding ways for them to participate in what is happening.
- ~ keeping them informed about what they may expect.
- ~ having the attention of an adult who makes them feel they count.
- ~ family and neighborhood support networks.
- ~ the spiritual beliefs of the family or the community.
- ~ (whenever possible) the maintenance of familiar routines.
- ~ offering children as much choice as possible about arrangements for their care.
- ~ whenever possible, answering their questions honestly, in easily understood language.

