

## HELPING THE BEREAVED CHILD AT SCHOOL

### *The bereaved child*

As far as possible, **let the child have a choice** about how classmates are told about the loss. Some children appreciate "telling the story" of their tragedy themselves, others like to choose an adult to do so. Some may not even wish to be present when classmates are told.

Children often find **comfort in answering their classmates' questions**, and sharing their knowledge and experience of this momentous part of life. Although children undoubtedly do grieve, they often do so episodically and idiosyncratically. So if a child is easily distracted by play, or does not show the subdued and sad emotions that we expect from bereaved adults, this does not mean that s/he is unfeeling or egotistical. **Children show their feelings in very different ways than adults do.**

It can be confusing for children when they suddenly find themselves showered with attention and often gifts. In fact, **it can be an uncomfortable that losing a loved one can feel like a birthday.** The most valuable attention is to show the child that you believe that their thoughts and questions are very important, and to help the child understand what has happened.

Children will also have many questions about how their life will be changed. "Who will buy my Christmas presents? Will we still be able to go to Disneyland? When will we get another Daddy?" These questions can seem inappropriate to adults and downright insensitive, but they are part of **the child's attempt to reconstruct the world as s/he knows it.**

The child's experience of life being secure and predictable is severely disrupted. To the degree that it is possible, **support the child's usual routines** and tell him or her the ways other people will help to do some of the things the lost parent used to do.

While some regression is to be expected, the child will benefit enormously by having adults help him/her **discriminate between his/her feelings and actions**. You can accept the child's feelings lovingly, but still remind them that their behavior needs to be acceptable. This will help the child retain the sense of **mastery and self-esteem** that can be undermined by loss.

The bereaved child benefits enormously if those around **keep the bereavement in mind, at least for the first 12 months**. After the "excitement" of out of town guests and attention from friends and neighbors dies down, the child's environment can become very lonely and melancholy. Be aware of special days like birthdays, Father's Day, Mother's Day, holidays and the anniversary of the death, all of which can be very hard for families, especially the first time.

Help the child also by **supporting the mourning adults in the child's life**. It can be tempting to take a child out and distract him/her from the sadness, but in the long run it is more helpful to support the new family unit in establishing itself.

Familiarize yourself with **what to expect from each developmental age group** in response to loss (see relevant Information Sheet). And expect that a child will function at a less mature level when faced with tragedy.

Remember that **the child's classmates and friends are also struggling** with their own sense of shock and perhaps inaccurate ideas about illness and loss. Open discussions will help all the children, including the bereaved child.