

HELPING THE BEREAVED CHILD'S CLASSMATES

When a child experiences a tragedy, the loss affects all the children who are part of his/her community. These are just general comments. It is important also to bear in mind the impact of the children's developmental stage (see the relevant Information Sheet).

When things go well, young children work on the assumption that their parents are all-powerful and immortal. The child gradually lets go of these beliefs, a process that is clearly completed in the teen years! So for these children, this may be their first experience of death, the first attack on their sense of safety.

For other children, this loss may be a one of a series of assaults on their sense of security. In addition to bereavement, divorce, incarceration, relocation may all contribute to a child's vulnerability and to the creation of various coping behaviors.

So what can we expect and how can we help?

Children's imaginings are much more frightening than the truth in most cases. Classmates will want to hear what happened, why it happened, what the funeral is like. More general questions will also be in many children's minds: "What would it be like for me if someone died in my family?", "Why do people die?", "What happens when people die?", "Is there a God?", "What happens to the body?" It is really helpful if the teacher or a counselor can facilitate a sharing of ideas among the children. (Note : The most important thing in these discussions is to emphasize that different people, cultures, religions have various ideas, all of which deserve to be respected.)

Classmates will need to talk about their various experiences of loss, whether a similar bereavement or the loss of a pet or even a toy. And those losses should all be acknowledged sympathetically. This is a valuable opportunity to teach children to be present to their own sadness and also to show compassion to others.

Some children distract themselves from difficult (sad) feelings by acting out. Help them to make the connection by saying something like this, "I can tell you are having a lot of feelings right now, but you need to show them to me some other way. You can make a drawing, or tell a story or tell me about it. Or let's try to find a way to help you to calm down first and maybe you will feel like talking afterwards."

Some children try to distance themselves from the disturbing feelings about loss by excluding the bereaved child or even making fun of them. As cruel as this may be, it is a signal that this child is having a lot of overwhelming reactions to the idea of loss. The behavior is more likely to change if someone can listen to that child's experience, rather than just reproaching them for their reactions.

We often forget that young children have limited experience of life and are very vulnerable to drawing incorrect conclusions about the cause of death, about guilt; sometimes they will take figures of speech literally. Try to be alert to misunderstandings that may arise. Ask children to tell you what they think they have been told -- there are often big distortions!

As much as we wish that we could protect children from tragedy, it is also an opportunity to teach them about the preciousness of loss, the importance of family and friends and the beauty of compassion.