

GUIDELINES FOR HELPING BEREAVED STUDENTS

By: Patricia Evans

All children, regardless of age, experience loss and grief. When given a safe environment in which to express what they are experiencing, the child's grief can become a process of growth and healing. The following guidelines are meant to provide just such an environment.

- **DO NOT** avoid the subject of death
- **DO NOT** deny children their feelings. Give them permission to express what they are experiencing without shame.
- **DO LISTEN!** Don't assume to know how they feel.
- **DO NOT** judge one child's reaction by another's
- **REASSURE** them that anger, guilt, sadness and tears are normal responses to loss.
- **TELL** them you are sorry about the loss.
- **ENCOURAGE** children to talk about their feelings, but respect their right not to talk if they choose not to. Suggest alternative means of expressing themselves such as drawing their feelings, writing a short story or poem, sculpting with clay, listening to music which seems to capture their feelings, choreographing a dance, etc.
- **ASSIST** children in understanding that to heal they will need time for solitude as well as time with their friends and family.
- **LET** them know that a person can be very sad even though he or she may not be crying and that people express their grief in different ways.
- **HELP** children to recognize their anger and to find non-hurtful, constructive ways of ventilating it.
- **ENCOURAGE** them to discuss their guilt feelings. Help them to determine if their guilt is justified or rational. Let them know they are only human and that we all continue to learn as we experience more of life. Look for signs of "magical thinking" among your children.
- **CHARITABLE** and other altruistic acts (e.g. raising money for charity to combat a disease that has taken the life of a classmate), provide socially constructive means of mourning and can help to mitigate feelings of guilt.
- **BE** aware of children's intellectual and emotional limitations and understand their developmental state.
- **PROVIDE** honest, clear and direct answers to questions about the death, the funeral and other aspects of the loss.

- **TRY** to be a role model for appropriate grief. Do not be afraid to express your own sadness.
- **EXPECT** that the grief process will be variable. Explain to children that they will experience high and low feelings, that there is nothing wrong with them.
- **DO NOT** make decisions for children to attempt to put a time frame on their grief process. Respect their individual and unique journeys with grief.
- **ENCOURAGE** children to take care of themselves and to understand that alcohol and other drugs only delay the grieving process. Grief, even though painful, must be worked through in order for healing to occur.
- **SUGGEST** (do not require or mandate) various readings related to death, loss and grief. For younger children, ask if they would like such a story read to them.
- **GIVE** hope, encouragement and tender loving care. If possible, provide things such as plants, music, and pets. (e.g. goldfish in the classroom) which are symbolic of life.

There are no magic solutions to make children feel better. Just **acknowledge their pain, listen** to them and **believe** in them.