

## **Helping your Child Cope with the Sudden Death of a Friend: A Message to Parents**

Parents, with their greater life experiences and wisdom, can place the events in a child's life in its proper context or perspective. Children look to adults for an interpretation of events, and measure the meaning of it, including the degree of danger they are in, by the reaction of their parents and other adults around them. It is critical that children are able to maintain a positive view of the world and a positive opinion of themselves in spite of the event.

### **The grieving process**

Grieving is a natural and temporary response to an important loss. People do not respond to a death related loss in any particular stage progression or pace. Some believe that the process is more like a roller coaster type pattern in which waves of various emotions are experienced. It is important to encourage children to cry if they feel sad. It can be said that when we feel really sad, letting ourselves cry is as important to our mental health as is eating when we are hungry, drinking when we are thirsty and sleeping when we are tired.

Most individuals return to their regular routines within one to three days. Yet a sustained period of bereavement may last four to six weeks. An intermittent pattern of bereavement continues in the form of painful thoughts and feelings which often resurface in the future more intensely at birth and death dates, holidays and special events, places or other experiences that are reminders of the deceased. Memories of the deceased may change or diminish over time but the deceased friend will not be forgotten.

### **Common reactions to the death of a friend:**

In addition to sadness, it is common for people to feel confusion, fear, anger, self-blame and guilt. Other common reactions include feelings of loneliness, a sense of responsibility or regret, reminders and dreams of the deceased, concentration difficulties, minor sleeping difficulties and mild somatic complaints.

### **What can parents do.**

A parent's emotional response to a grieving child can reduce the emotional effect or make it worse for the child.

\*The following are suggested parental responses: Be physically present, show warmth, be patient, allow the child to talk about it, listen carefully, acknowledge feelings, show an understanding of what happened, give reasonable reassurance and follow through on promises and agreements made. Teens will try to make some sense of what happened and it is important for them to come to a resolution about the event. Carefully challenge any negative conclusions and reinforce the positive ones.

\*The following parental behaviors can be harmful: Focus on self instead of the child, deny the seriousness of the event, shrug off the child's feelings, tell the child not to think or talk about it, make assumptions, overreact with anxiety or anger, withdraw from the child, or make major changes in the normal household activities and routines.

If you are concerned about your child you may want to contact your family physician, or a psychologist or social worker in your child's school or community.

References:

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