Helping Children Grieve

*Guidelines for helping children who have experienced the death of someone important*

- Take the word “death” off the taboo list. Allow it to become a concept that can be discussed openly in the home, school, or place of worship.

- Understand that mourning and sadness are appropriate for people of all ages. It’s been said that “if you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve”. Grief has no timeline and children may experience the loss in different ways as they grow and develop. Do not rush or force their grief process.

- Allow children to release their emotions. Let them call their emotions by their right names: anger, sad, hurt, relief, guilt, etc. It is not the expression of emotions that is harmful; it is the repression that harms. Name that it is okay and important to have happy feelings too.

- Consider contacting the child’s school and inform them of the loss in the family so teachers and administrators can be aware of and understand behavior changes and communicate these with you.

- Tell the child he or she is not the man or the woman of the house now, nor does she or he replace a dead sibling. Do not treat children as a substitute adult or confidant. Do not deprive them of their childhood.

- Avoid the use of stories or fairy tales to explain the mystery of death. Do not cover up facts with fiction or confusing interpretation that you will someday have to retract. Be honest about the cause of death. Do not say “so and so has gone away on a long journey,” or, “God took your mother because God needs good people.” These statements confuse children. Concrete language can be harder for adults to use, but easier for children to grasp.

- Let the children know that you do not have all the answers. Leave room for doubts, questions, and differences of opinion. It’s okay to say, “I don’t know everything about death. That is why we need to talk together.” If you don’t know the answer to a question, ask the child what his thoughts are.

- Express your own emotions of grief. By showing what you feel, you model that it’s okay to express emotions to the people who care about us. Children need your permission to express their feelings and to mourn.

- Continue to give love and assurance to children. The caring and concern over the next months and years will be of great value in a child’s grief journey. Be willing to listen for minutes, hours and days.

- If you need assistance in supporting your child, seek help from a grief specialist, guidance counselor or clergy person.