CHILDREN AND GRIEF

“Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.”
-Alan Wolfelt

What is grief?
• It is any reaction to a perceived loss: a death, divorce, moving, changing schools, serious illness, etc...
• It is normal, natural and necessary
• It is holistic. A child may have reactions that show themselves in many ways. Reactions can be loosely grouped into five major areas: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social.

A grieving child may experience:

Physical
• Changes in sleep patterns
• Changes in eating habits
• Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches, sore throat, etc...)
• Become sick more often
• Muscle tension

Mental/Intellectual
• Difficulty concentrating
• Changes in school performance
• Forgetfulness
• Distractedness

Social
• Difficulty with new roles at home or at school
• The desire to play one minute and become upset the next
• Anxiety over being alone
• A desire to withdraw from peers and/or family

Emotional
• Shock, denial or numbness
• Fear (of the dark, that someone else will die, that they will die, etc...)
• Anger or aggressive behaviors
• “Grief bursts” or crying spells that last for a brief time
• Sadness, depression or apathy
• Blaming themselves or feeling guilty about things they did or said before the death
• Relief or happiness
• Overwhelmed or confused
• Anxiety or worry

Spiritual
• Questions about the afterlife
• Asking, “why?”
• Changes in spiritual/religious beliefs
• Sensing the presence of the deceased person
• Powerful dreams
# Children’s Developmental Stages and Grief:

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| INFANTS AGES 0-2| ▪ May experience loss as an absence, particularly of a primary caregiver.            | ▪ Changes in normal patterns of eating, sleeping, bowel and bladder habits, and interacting. | ▪ Offer physical comfort.  
▪ Maintain a routine.  
▪ Provide stable environment. |
| PRESCHOOLERS AGES 3–5 | ▪ Death is temporary and/or reversible.  
▪ Dead person continues to live and function in some ways.  
▪ May feel responsible for death because of wishes and thoughts. | ▪ Grief expressed primarily through play.  
▪ May reenact the death.  
▪ May ask questions about the death over and over again. | ▪ Allow “death play.”  
▪ Join in and offer guidance.  
▪ Answer questions honestly and simply.  
▪ Use drawings and stories to help children express feelings. |
| GRADE SCHOOLERS AGES 6–11 | ▪ Beginning to see death as permanent.  
▪ Death happens to others.  
▪ May see death as a person or spirit—a ghost or the bogeyman. | ▪ Curious about death.  
▪ Will ask specific questions and want details.  
▪ Concerned with how others are responding.  
▪ May exhibit aggressive behavior (especially boys). | ▪ Answer questions honestly and simply.  
▪ Talk to them about how you are feeling and let them know it is ok to express their grief.  
▪ Offer constructive “venting” activities. |
| ADOLESCENTS AGES 12 AND UP | ▪ A more mature understanding of death as permanent and universal.  
▪ Egocentrism may cause an “it won’t happen to me” philosophy  
▪ Just beginning to explore spiritual aspects of death. | ▪ Heightened emotions of anger, guilt, and shame.  
▪ May exhibit depression, denial, and repression.  
▪ May act out, withdraw, exhibit mood swings and/or engage in impulsive behaviors, including sexual behaviors.  
▪ May idealize the deceased, especially if deceased is friend, sibling, or parent. | ▪ Tolerate acting out behaviors if teen or others are not being harmed.  
▪ Be available, but do not take control.  
▪ Encourage search for meaning—questions about life and death—as long as teen or others are not harmed. |

**Helpful Websites:**  
www.hospicefoundation.org/griefandLoss/  
www.hospicenet.org  
www.kidsgrief.com
References:

