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Supporting Teens Through Difficult Times

Signs of Grief in Children and Teens:

Even the most articulate child or teen expresses grief through verbal, emotional, and physical behaviors. Since each young person is unique and expresses grief in his/her own way, there is a wide range of normal behaviors in the aftermath of a loss. The following are some normal and worrisome behaviors that may be signs of grief in children:

Normal VERBAL Behaviors:

- Talking about the deceased or loss a lot
- Not talking about the deceased or loss at all
- Asking numerous questions
- Not asking any questions
- Wanting to hear story of the loss over and over
- Not wanting to hear the story
- Wishing to be with the deceased
- Engaging attention by talking a lot
- Saying clownish things
- Mentioning nighttime dreams about the person who died
- Voicing fears of almost everything and anything
- Voicing worries about safety, other people getting sick or dying

Normal EMOTIONAL Behaviors:

- Oceans of tears
- Crying at unexpected times
- Having strong feelings about seemingly small things
- Over-reacting to a situation
- Under-reacting to a situation
- Inability to concentrate or focus
- Being angry at everybody and everything
- Noncompliance with adults
- Needing to be near an adult all the time
- Not wanting to leave home
- Seeing someone and believing it is the person who died
- Lowered self-esteem
- Forgetfulness
- Irritability
- Clowning

Normal PHYSICAL Behaviors:

- Eating a lot
- Not eating much
- Sleeping a lot
- Not sleeping
- Urine and bowel accidents
- Pains in stomach and other areas that cannot be explained by physician
- Non-serious, recurrent illnesses such as colds, sore throats, etc.
- Older children wanting to do babyish things such as suck a bottle, play with dolls
- Aggressive behavior such as hitting, pinching
- Needing to touch people frequently
- Weariness and fatigue, even with enough sleep
- Wanting to rip and destroy things

WORRISOME Behaviors that May Indicate a Need for Extra Support or Referral:

- Dangerous risk taking: climbing too high, driving too fast, not being afraid
- Threatening to hurt self or others
- Self destructive behaviors: drug use, promiscuity, hurting or hitting self

- Violent play
- Total withdrawal from people and environment
- A dramatic change in personality or functioning over a long period of time
- Any of the "normal" behaviors happening over a very long time or to an extreme

A Special Note about Suicide:

When a child or teen speaks about wanting to die or taking his/her own life, you should always take it seriously, and seek professional help immediately. Some behaviors that may mean your son or daughter is at risk for suicide include the following:

- Saying, "I want to kill myself" or "I wish I were dead"
- Total apathy about things the child or teen used to care about
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Showing interest in violent acts or how others have completed suicide
- Writing notes to friends about ending his/her life
- Giving away previously valued possessions
- Asking questions about the use and availability of guns or medications in your home
- Asking a close friend to enter into a "suicide pact"

Source: Helen McGlaulin

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