HELPING THE GRIEVING CHILD

Children are sensitive to, and aware of changes happening around them, even through they may not understand the total context of the events. When those changes cause chaos and loss, they need to make sense of these changes by:

- being told clearly, directly and truthfully what is happening,
- having caring adults who will make time to listen to their story,
- having adults who are not afraid to talk about the issues and events when raised by the child,
- having comfort and reassurance from adults, knowing they are safe and that caring adults are in control,
- adults sharing their grief with the child without seeking support from the child,
- adults being honest, trustworthy, reliable.

GOOD SELF CARE

While parents provide the main support or help their children through grief and loss, they may need assistance to do so. Parental support can be received from the school, friends, other significant adults or professionals. Parents, ensure you are getting support for yourself from another adult to share your own feelings and clarify your own thoughts.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN

- DON'T JUMP AHEAD - or assume you know what they will say beforehand.
- DON'T JUMP IN - by butting in or by giving advice, opinions or answers; just listen.
- DON'T JUMP DOWN (their throat) - and tell them they shouldn't feel that way when they do.
- DON'T JUMP ON (the bandwagon) - and tell them this just happened to you as well.
- DON'T JUMP AWAY - not wanting to hear what is being said out of fear or disinterest because you have heard it all before.
- DON'T JUMP WITH too much - children often ask simple question and require uncomplicated answers.
**DO CHILDREN GRIEVE?**

Children have as much capacity as adults to experience grief in response to a loss. They feel it as powerfully as adults but express their grief differently. With help from adults who care for them, they can work through their grief successfully.

- Childhood grief is a normal part of childhood in response to loss.
- Parents provide the care and support for recovery of their children.
- Children need to grieve their losses as they experience it, to avoid a delayed reaction in adulthood.
- Children's responses to grief are dependent on their age and development.
- Children may grieve more or less than their parents to similar events.

**TRAUMATIC LOSS**

Child may experience the impact of an incident directly or indirectly, and have their sense of security brutally taken away. Their reactions to trauma accompanying grief may be much more intense, and cause further stresses to children. These children need to work through their trauma as well as their grief.

Examples of trauma include: fire, theft, break-ins at school and home and death of a loved one.

**HOW DO CHILDREN GRIEVE?**

Children do not grieve as adults do. They may grieve in brief bursts or may not seem to respond at all. Allow for individual reactions to grief, and for this to be expressed through behaviour that matches the child's age.

- It is normal for children to move in and out of grief, allowing them to gradually accept their loss, making it less overwhelming (eg there maybe bursts of grief interspersed with normal activities and behaviour).
- Children seek relief in noisy activity and play.
- They may re-enact an experience.
- They use behaviour to express anger and emotions.
- Their reactions may seem inappropriate as they substitute emotions that they can handle for those they cannot.
- They may paint, draw, play music, talk, ask questions and share worries about their loss as they need to clarify their thinking out loud with a caring adult.
- Sometimes children will talk to someone other than their parents, especially if they too are involved in the loss.

**SOME REACTIONS TO GRIEF**

- Switching off or withdrawing.
- Changes in behaviour.

**SOME REACTIONS To Grief cont....**

- Developing tears and phobias.
- Displaying anger, aggression or rejection.
- Not separating easily at bedtime or school.
- Physical complaints for which there is no apparent cause.
- Temper tantrums.
- Assuming the role of the deceased.
- Low self esteem, aloneness.
- Self blame.
- Drop in school performance.

**CHILDREN'S NEEDS DURING CRISIS**

The biggest need for children in times of loss and trauma is to be cared for, to be supported and to have someone to talk to.

- As far as possible, maintain family and class routines.
- Adults need to maintain adult roles to support children.
- To express their grief in appropriate ways for their age.
- To have contact between themselves, the school and the parents.

It helps if the class is prepared to welcome them back to school.