

## WHEN TO REFER GRIEVING CHILDREN TO A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

A child's grieving is a child's healthy response to a loss. However, the manifestations of a child's grief can resemble the symptoms of some childhood physical and emotional disorders, for example, depression, anxiety, Attention Deficit, physical illness and conduct disorder. It can be difficult to discern when to refer a child to a professional counselor and when to be patient and support a child's natural grieving process.

### A Child's Grief Symptoms

#### Feeling

sadness  
anger  
guilt/self-reproach  
anxiety/fear  
loneliness  
relief  
absence of feeling  
hopelessness

#### Physical

fatigue  
sleep disturbance/more or less  
appetite disturbance/more or less  
unexplained pain/headaches, stomachaches  
prone to illness  
prone to accidents  
shortness of breath  
tight muscles

#### Cognitive

short-term memory loss  
inability to concentrate  
temporary loss of sequential thinking  
confusion  
hallucinations  
preoccupation

#### Behavior

social withdrawal  
avoidance of difficulties  
hyperactivity  
crying easily  
day-dreaming  
combative/acting out  
perfectionism/trying to be good  
compulsive caring for others  
self-destructive

All grieving children can benefit from a referral to one of the area's children's bereavement programs. These programs are based on supporting a child's natural grieving process:

The Dougy Center (503-775-5683)

Stepping Stones (360-696-5120)

Me Too, and Company (503-499-5307)

School Support Groups

**Professional Intervention** should be used when a child needs to redirect his/her grieving process away from behaviors that are causing further harm to the child or to others. Refer to a professional counselor when:

1. The way the child is coping with his/her grief adds further trauma to a child's life, for example, when a child is shoplifting, flunking, being anorexic or abusing drugs/alcohol.
2. The child's grief symptoms are persisting for a long time and in a profound way, for example, when a sleep disturbance becomes chronic insomnia. (Keep in mind that some grief does not begin in a serious way until after certain other events have been completed, such as the trial process for a murder or a custody battle – these events can take years.)
3. The child talks about committing suicide. (Suicidal ideation is common in grieving children, often representing a wish to be with the one who died. This wish may or may not be life-threatening. It is wise to follow-up with a professional suicide assessment.)