

## Talking to Your Child about Death

A parent's emotional response to a grieving child can reduce the emotional effect or make it worse for the child.

### The following are suggested parental responses:

- Be physically present
- Show warmth
- Be patient
- Allow your child to talk about it
- **Listen** carefully
- Acknowledge feelings
- Show an understanding of what happened
- Give reasonable reassurance and follow through on promises and agreements made

### The following parental behaviors can be harmful:

- Focus on self instead of the child
- Deny the seriousness of the event
- Shrug off the child's feelings
- Tell the child not to think or talk about it
- Make assumptions
- Overreact with anxiety or anger
- Withdraw from the child
- Make major changes in the normal household activities and routines

### Reactions to be concerned about:

- Ongoing feelings of being real unhappy, sad or empty inside
- An obvious loss of interest or pleasure in friends and activities
- Significant weight loss or weight gain
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Slowness of thought, speech and activity
- Extreme agitation or restlessness
- Feelings of low energy or fatigue
- Feeling hopeless, worthless, shame or a lot of guilt
- Difficulty concentrating, making basic decisions and doing school work
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide

If you are concerned about your child you may want to contact your family physician, a psychologist, counselor or social worker in your child's school or community.

#### References:

- American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- Grollman, E. "Explaining Death And Dying To Our Children And Ourselves" Elgin, IL. January 28, 2000.
- Johnson, K. (1989) *Trauma in the Lives of Children*. Alameda, CA: Hunter House.