

### **Provide Information**

- Give simple, honest and age appropriate explanations about loss or death
- Fantasy is often more frightening than facts
- Use concrete, accurate, and age-appropriate terminology—no euphemisms
- Reassure children about normal grieving and individual responses
- Repeat information as often as needed

### **Check Out**

- What they already know about loss or death in general and this one is particular
- What their understanding of your information and of words used by other adults
- Their fears and feelings (don't make assumptions)
- What they really mean by their comments and questions
- What would be helpful
- Any changes in behavior

### **Maintain Structure And Routine**

- Provide firm, caring structure that allows some flexibility—space and time to withdraw, to cry, etc. Returning to pre-existing schedules and routines can help, but if the child feels unable to attend school or other activity they should be allowed more flexibility in their schedule. This would not be a good time to make major changes, such as moving to a new home, or changing schools or daycare arrangements. The death may fuel childhood insecurities and their only consolation may come from home. Teenagers often resist support, particularly from adults. Peer support is much more important to the teen. Some support groups offer sibling groups that can connect teens with one another. This is far more effectual in grief resolution than forcing adult intervention.
- Maintain consistent rules and order—keep the usual limits set for their behavior

### **Offer Opportunities To Create Rituals, Remember The Loss**

- Provide opportunities to say goodbye and let go. This is a concrete way, while still keeping the memory alive, to make the loss or death real.

Remember, grieving can produce upsetting responses such as disturbed sleep, diminished appetite, difficulty concentrating, and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. These responses will likely subside with time. However, if reactions are especially long lasting or troubling, you may need to turn to a professional for assistance.

### **Benefits of Counseling**

Some of the benefits of seeking counseling are:

- Reviewing the incident and processing the event can help victims clarify what actually occurred.
- The disruption due to trauma can make daily functioning difficult. Counseling can help develop coping skills and strategies, allowing for the continuance of school, work or relationships.
- Establishment of a support network helps to decrease the negative physical, psychological and emotional effects that often result from the traumatic experience.

Survivors can utilize the experience as an opportunity to build and practice assertiveness, confidence, and protective instinct skills.

### **Who can help?**

The Mesa Police Department Victim Services Unit can assist with information regarding referrals to appropriate helping professionals or organizations according to your specific needs.

### **Resources**

**Community Information and Referral**  
(602) 263-8856

**EMPACT Crisis Hotline**  
(480) 784-1500

# Victim Services Unit

## Children and the Grief Process



Mesa Police Department  
Victim Services Unit  
130 N Robson  
Mesa, AZ 85201  
(480) 644-4075

**This brochure provides information for you and your family on children and the process of grief. (Please keep in mind that every child reacts individually and that the ages presented are a guide.)**

When a family member dies, children react differently from adults. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible—a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who die and come to life again. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

Adding to a child's shock and confusion at the death of a brother, sister, or parent is the unavailability of other family members who may be so shaken by grief that they are not able to cope with the normal responsibility of childcare.

When a child is involved in a death related crisis, it is important to talk to them. Simplicity and honesty are the best approaches. Talk to them about the person who died and reassure them they did not cause the death. Let them know they are loved and wanted. Answer their questions directly and honestly, offering details when they ask. If the child begins to behave inappropriately or the parent's have significant concerns, they should be addressed as soon as possible.

## Common Responses

Parents should be aware of normal childhood responses to a death in the family, as well as signs when a child is having difficulty coping with grief. It is normal during the weeks following the death for some children to feel immediate grief or persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. However, long-term denial of the death or avoidance of grief can be emotionally unhealthy and can later lead to more severe problems.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

After a death, many children will act younger than they are. The child may temporarily become more infantile—talk 'baby talk' and demand food, attention and cuddling. Younger children frequently believe they are the cause of what happens around them. A young child may believe a parent, grandparent, brother, or sister died because he or she had once wished the person dead when they were angry. The child feels guilty or blames him or herself because the wish came true.

### Common thoughts of surviving children:

- Did I cause the death?
- Will others in my family die too?
- Am I going to die?
- Why wasn't it me?
- When will mom and dad be happy again?
- When will brother (sister) come home?

### Common behavior displayed by surviving children:

- Fear of paramedics or police investigators upon hearing the familiar sirens—a visit to the fire station, hospital or police department and meeting those that responded may help.
- Inappropriate humor may result as a way to express grief. This humor may be the result of a child's incapacity to tolerate intense grieving. Children are not able to grieve for long periods of time and need frequent breaks from their sadness. It does not mean they are uncaring.
- Some children take on the parental role of caregiver in response to parents being "unavailable" due to their own grief.

## Signs of Difficulty

Children who are having serious problems with grief and loss may show one or more of these signs:

- an extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events
- inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone
- acting much younger for an extended period
- excessively imitating the dead person
- repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- withdrawal from friends, or
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

## Helping them Express Grief

### Self Awareness

- Be aware of your feeling about loss or death in general, and children and death in particular
- Children learn to grieve from the attitudes, expressions and behaviors of the significant adults in their lives

### Invite/Acknowledge/Listen/Give Permission

- Communicate your support, caring, availability in both verbal and non verbal ways
- Give permission to grieve through sharing information, acknowledging reactions and feelings, providing various opportunities for expression
- Match their mode of expression in order to communicate
- Acknowledge and allow their plan: don't overprotect or try to hurry them through it
- Be gentle and reassuring
- Your behavior, attitude and comfort level is more important than anything you can say
- Often, sitting quietly and listening is sufficient support