NEEDS OF BEREAVED CHILDREN

1. **THEY NEED TO KNOW THEY ARE GOING TO BE TAKEN CARE OF.**
   One of the questions frequently on the minds of bereaved children is “Who will take care of me?” Address this issue. Even if they have not said anything about it, they are thinking it. They need to be assured that even with the loved one gone, they will still be taken care of.

2. **THEY NEED TO KNOW THAT THEY DID NOT CAUSE THE DEATH.**
   Especially between the ages of 3-5 and early adolescence, children may think that something they did may have caused the death of their loved one. Perhaps if they had been nicer to the person, or if they hadn’t had an argument with the person that person would still be alive.

3. **THEY NEED CLEAR INFORMATION ABOUT THE DEATH.**
   They need to know clearly how the person they cared about died. They may wonder “Will it happen to me?” or “Can I catch what they had and die?” If the children don’t know how the person died, they will make it up. When explaining how the person died, keep in mind the level of understanding of the child. Don’t explain more than they will be able to comprehend.

4. **THEY NEED TO FEEL IMPORTANT AND INVOLVED.**
   The child should be included in any activity that memorializes the person who died. There are many different kinds of activities in which children can participate. These include decisions surrounding the service, memorial remembrances or other significant events associated with the deceased.

5. **THEY NEED CONTINUED STRUCTURE.**
   Children need continued structure in their lives. They still need to have a set bed time, a set schedule. Many times people will alter the child’s schedule or discipline to “go easy on them”, but this is incorrect. They need to know that there is still a schedule to keep and rules to follow, despite the death of their loved one.

6. **THEY NEED SOMEONE TO LISTEN TO THEM.**
   Children need someone who will be able to listen to their fears, fantasies and questions. They need permission to feel the way they do. They need to be allowed to grieve. They need to be told that it is O.K. for them to feel the way they do (sad, confused etc.) and that they have someone they can talk to, if not you, then another family member or friend.

7. **THEY NEED TO BE ABLE TO REMEMBER THE PERSON WHO DIED.**
   Children need to be able to talk about the person who died. They need to be able to share their memories and talk about what that person meant to them. For example, a memory book is an excellent activity for the family to work on together.
8. **THEY NEED ADULTS WHO CAN MODEL APPROPRIATE GRIEVING BEHAVIOR.**
Children need to see adults grieving in an appropriate way. Children will look to the adults to determine how they should grieve. For example, if they see an adult who refuses to cry in their presence, they may internalize that to mean that it is not O.K. to cry. By observing appropriate grieving behavior, the child will feel more comfortable to grieve as well.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** You are also grieving. It is important that you deal with your own grief, so that you are better able to help your child. If you find that at times you are not able to do all of the things on this list, ask a relative or friend for help.

**This handout was taken in part from J. William Worden’s book *Children and Grief.*