

## Courageous Kids Grief Support for Youth

CK believes that it is developmentally normal to grieve the death of a loved one. A death often forces children and teens to deal with feelings and confront issues that most people do not have to face until they become adults. Their experience with death, grief and mourning gives youth a very different perspective of a world that no longer feels as safe as they would like it to be. With appropriate support they often gain emotional maturity beyond their age.

There is a tendency in our culture to think that young people are incapable of grieving as intensely as adults. Over the years, we have learned that this is simply not true. **Children and teens can grieve as intensely as adults.** However, they express their grief differently. Kids process their grief as they are developmentally able to and then re-process parts of it as they developmentally gain new understanding. Unprocessed grief can surface later in life, after another loss, a life-changing event or during a personal crisis.

Although toddlers and preschoolers cannot understand the meaning and permanency of death, they are capable of understanding that something in their life has dramatically changed or been disrupted. Elementary age children have a lot of magical thinking. They tend to believe that everything that happens in their lives is because of something they did or didn't do. They also want concrete information about the specifics of the death and related circumstances. Middle School age children begin to understand death more clearly and can feel a deep and pervasive sadness. The older teens tend to turn to their peers for support. Many feel guilty about having fun, yet it is a normal part of the grieving process. It is not unusual at any age for the child/youth to temporarily regress in their behaviors. Worries and fears may surface, especially about themselves or other family members dying. If the adults in the family are grieving too, the children might benefit from other adults tuning in with them. Maintaining as many schedules and routines as possible fosters a sense of safety and stability. It is important for everyone in the family to be allowed to grieve in their own way. Much tension and anger can arise between family members because they misunderstand each others grieving style. Intuitive grievers process by expressing and talking about their feelings. Instrumental grievers feel just as deeply, but they get involved in projects and receive little benefit from being encouraged to express their feelings. Also children dip in and out of their grief. Feelings, thoughts and questions pop up, seemingly out of the blue. Then, just as quickly, the child can turn back to their play, laugh and have fun. One of the most helpful things to children and teens – and most difficult to do – is to allow them to have their feelings. Our attempts to “make them feel better” usually only lead to the youth shutting down. They sense we have a hard time seeing them in pain and begin to protect us by hiding it. Listening, simply and attentively, without trying to fix anything, is usually the most helpful.

**Overview** - The Courageous Kids Program provides a safe and loving environment where children who are dealing with the death of a loved one can express their feelings and move toward healing. The program currently provides: 1) a caring and accepting atmosphere to help children gain the courage to express their feelings and thoughts about their loss, to validate and normalize their experience and to teach coping skills 2) age appropriate activities based on the developmental stage of the children to stimulate healthy processing 3) an opportunity for grieving children to develop relationships and receive support from each other; and 4) information and support to families, caregivers, teachers and school counselors about the needs of grieving children at various developmental stages.

The Courageous Kids Groups consists of weekly support group meetings for children who are trying to cope with the loss of a loved one and for their parents/caregivers. Provided are developmentally appropriate expressive art activities as non- threatening mediums that allow younger youth to express their feelings. They expand their feeling vocabulary, experience the support of peers and begin to feel validated and normalized. Concurrent with the youth groups are the parent support groups. Both come together for several activities during a term, always with the goal of assisting the parents to support their children more deeply. The adult groups have 3 components: 1) support for themselves, 2) education about understanding and supporting their children's grieving and 3) doing the same or similar expressive art activities in order to experience the kind of work the children are doing.

The Courageous Kids Camp is an annual event providing a unique opportunity for children who have experienced a death in their families. The residential summer camp accommodates about 40 young people (ages 6 to 17) with a ratio of almost one volunteer for each camper. Professionals provide therapeutic activities in art, music, sand play, drama and challenge courses on a volunteer basis. Some kids discover they can allow themselves to experience the intensity of grief and still have permission to play. Some cry for the first time. Some begin to talk about the death of their loved one for the first time. Many feel empowered to make the huge adjustments required of them and many feel inspired to return later as volunteers.

The Courageous Kids School Support Groups make the support available at a limited number of schools to children who cannot come to the agency. Transportation, especially in the surrounding rural areas, is often a problem. They are co-facilitated by a Courageous Kids staff and the teacher or school counselor, who is also available to support the children during the week. This method also provides training and information to the school staff, who are then better equipped to help other grieving children.