

## *Helping Children in a Time of Trouble -- A Few Thoughts*

*Nancy Foster*

*Acorn Hill Children's Center*

In a time of trouble, such as the death of a family member or friend, parents are faced with the question of how to help the children through this time. In a sense, the question will have many as answers as there are particular children and since children respond so differently to a situation, according to their age and nature. Parents are frequently brought up short by the realization that they must first face their own feelings and questions. Next comes the necessity of dealing with a child's questions.

A generally-accepted "rule of thumb" in responding to children's questions is to give only as much information as the child is actually requesting. As adults, our thoughts on a topic tend to be quite far-ranging, while the child's question is likely to be on a much more direct level. It is better to err on the side of simplicity; if a child needs to know more, another question will surely follow. Your answer to "what happens to someone who has died" will, of course, depend on your own view of this; in any case, a simple picture is usually best for a child. Your honest expression of sorrow and sympathy is very beneficial in helping a child to experience and cope with loss, but uncontrolled emotions are usually troubling or even frightening for the young child. The adult's efforts to recognize and accept grief without being overwhelmed by it can be a profound example to a child.

Some children may appear to become obsessed by the death, asking question after question and seeming unsatisfied by any number of answers. The sensitive parent will soon realize that this child is seeking for something other than words to quiet his or her anxieties. Often the best answer is a warm hug and words such as, "That's enough talk for now: come, it's time to pick some flowers for the supper table" (or some other such homely task). This child needs most of all an expression of love from the parent and the reassurance that life will go on, in the form of normal activities, even in the midst of grief. This is not to deny the grief, but to help the child work through it in the way most natural to children -- through activity. If it seems appropriate, the child can be encouraged to help bake a loaf of bread for the bereaved family, or perhaps to make a card to send.

The place of ritual in helping the children and adults to cope with loss should not be overlooked. Rituals are "special times for special happenings," in the words of Julius Segal, a psychologist writing in the *Washington Post* some years ago. Such rituals, which may be religious, secular, or familial in origin, "can provide a strengthening sense of order and meaning in times of trouble. They can help maintain the form and rhythm of lives shaken by trauma and grief..." Mr. Segal's theme was the role of ritual in creating a stable, fulfilling family life, but it can also be applied to times of trouble. For a child who shows a continuing, deep concern about a death, establishing a simple ritual can be very comforting. For example, the child may help to create a special setting with perhaps a candle, a small vase of flowers, some beautiful autumn leaves, some acorns or crystals... and at a particular time each day (just before or after dinner, possibly, or before the bedtime story) the candle may be lighted and a song sung, or a verse recited, "to send our thoughts" or "to send our love" to the one who has died or to the family. Such a ritual may serve as a kind of anchor in a sea of grief or anxiety, as well as diminishing the sense of helplessness in the face of another's loss.

Finally, a story which contains a simple but meaningful picture of the spiritual origins of life and its destinies can be of great help to a child. From such a story -- as from all true stories -- the child can take the image or images which will be of most help to him or her.