

# The Six Reconciliation Needs of Mourning Children

(Adapted from *Healing the Bereaved Child*, by Alan D. Wolfelt, PHD)

## **1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.**

Children need open, honest, clear, and developmentally appropriate information about the nature and cause of the death. In addition, the child may need help understanding what death means (e.g., the body has stopped working and the person will never see, breathe, talk again). The ability to acknowledge the reality of the death only comes about after the child has had opportunities to talk out, play out, and even act out the circumstances of the death. This may take several months and requires the gentle support of a significant adult who can accept the child's need to confront reality some of the time while pushing it away at other times.

## **2. Move toward the pain of the loss while being nurtured physically, emotionally, and spiritually.**

In reality, it is in moving toward our hurts that we ultimately heal. The bereaved child must be allowed and encouraged to embrace the wide range of thoughts and feelings that result from the death. Caring adults often want to protect a child by avoiding talk about the death, but children need to know that it is okay to experience and express their feelings of grief. In addition, children need the security of being nurtured and knowing that their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs will continue to be met despite major changes.

## **3. Convert the relationship with the person who has died from one of presence to one of memory.**

This need involves moving from a "here and now" perspective to a "what was" perspective. This shift may manifest in memories and dreams as well as in concrete actions such as making memory books, carrying keepsakes or photographs of the deceased, and participating in family memorial rituals. Remembering makes hope possible. As children embrace the past, they become open to new experiences and relationships.

## **4. Develop a new self-identity based on a life without the person who died.**

When a family member or friend dies, the social and functional roles in the child's family or peer groups change (e.g., who cooks dinner each night, or who is the child's confidante). In addition, the relationship to the deceased was a critical part of the child's self-definition, so the death permanently changes the child's self-identity. Therefore the child is mourning not only the losses on the outside, but those on the

inside. As the child redefines his/her identity, he/she may act in ways that are unfamiliar as he/she "tries on" new identities.

### **5. Relate the experience of the death to a context of meaning.**

After the death of a loved one the child's perception of the meaning of life is naturally changed. Even young children search for meaning when they are bereaved, trying to understand all the "how's" and "whys" of the death and resulting changes. The child is likely to ask many questions, sometimes repeatedly even if they have already been answered. Many questions are "cosmic" in nature and may not have answers. Sometimes the child does not verbalize this search for meaning, but demonstrates it in art, play, or acting-out behaviors. The child may appear to be truly suffering as he/she goes through this search for meaning. A patient, non-judgmental adult can support the child as he/she learns to accept that there are things we cannot know and cannot have control over.

### **6. Experience a continued supportive adult presence in future years.**

Grief is a process, not an event. The long-term nature of grief means that bereaved children will need adult "stabilizers" in their lives even long after the event of the death. Even those children who actively participate in the work of mourning will still mourn the loss in different ways as they pass through various developmental stages and on into adulthood. Adult caregivers can facilitate this mourning need by appreciating the impact of loss on children and allowing and encouraging a child to mourn long after the death. We must view grief not as an enemy to be overcome, but as a necessary consequence of having loved.