Some ways you can help children who are grieving include:

- creating and providing an atmosphere that lets them know their thoughts and feelings will be recognized and supported
- helping them clarify their own understanding by listening, validating and acknowledging their experience
- playing games, reading stories and participating in activities that help them express a variety of feelings
- creating room for play – children may not talk about their feelings like adults and will often act them out more through play
- being patient and available - check in with them over time; and assist them with memorial activities and rituals

Here are some ways to provide support to grieving teens:

- make yourself available
- listen - really listen
- when they're feeling down, don't be overly cheery – it discounts their pain
- ask questions, be curious because you care, ask questions to understand - If we cannot talk about it, "it" cannot change
- Be about your own feelings—and accepting of theirs
- try not to show that you are upset, shocked by language or what they share: "If I give you my worst, will you still care?"

Our Privacy Policy

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Saying good bye to a loved one is not an easy task, and grief is a very personal journey, but that doesn't mean it must be travelled alone.

The Langley Hospice Society offers child and youth loss support programs, free of charge through their Supportive Program Centre in Langley, offerings include: one-to-one and group grief support and outreach programs, seasonal day camps and family events. You don't require a referral and can contact us directly. For more information please call our Supportive Program Centre at 604.530.1115 or visit: **www.langleyhospice.ca**

Langley Hospice Society
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Providing Support to

Grieving Children and Teens

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Supporting Children and Teens Who are Grieving...

Children and teens who have experienced the death of a significant person in their life often do not talk about their loss with others. Grief brings powerful emotions to the surface, but the isolation surrounding the loss can be more painful than the loss itself.

When children experience the loss of a significant person in their lives, they grieve within the context of a family – impacting the entire family system. Children learn about grief through observing, listening and talking to their family members. If the family does not talk about the death, share their feelings or openly grieve, it is not likely that children will. Due to family dynamics, and the difference between how adults and children grieve, youth are often referred to as forgotten grievers.

It is important that those supporting grieving children and teens understand that grief has a purpose and needs to happen.

When we have an accident and hurt ourselves, the pain is a message that we need to take care of ourselves; that same thing is true with the pain of the grieving process - it has the same healing function. It's a message that we need to take care of some wound of life. The pain of loss does not disappear by disallowing grief; it often lies just under the surface of our attention like an old wound which keeps reopening as we go through life's changes. Adults who are able to confront, confront, explore and learn from their own personal experiences and fears about death can be a great source of help when children are grieving a loss.

Children grieve in ways similar and different to adults:

- Children tend to move in and out of intense feelings, rather than sustaining high levels of one emotion for long periods of time.
- They have an innate ability to play out their experiences.
- Developmentally, children and teens are more egocentric - they are still dependent on adults for their survival needs.
- Throughout this emotional turmoil, children and teens often regress in behaviours to an earlier age – indicating a need for safety, nurturing and comfort.
- They are experiencing very powerful emotions often for the first time and may not know how to verbalize or understand these feelings - so they are often acted out in behaviours.
- Teens in particular view feelings as vulnerable and will therefore try to avoid them or bury them.

It is important to remember that grieving is a process that takes time. Grief does not simply go away after a specific amount of time; it is normal for the feelings to emerge years after the loss. If children and youth are able to grieve and express their feelings, slowly over time, the intensity of a loss will gradually decrease.

Daily life contains many pitfalls for youth who have experienced the death of a family member. New acquaintances ask about their family, other kids complain about family members. Each year brings celebrations and family occasions such as birthdays, anniversary dates, and holidays that can be especially difficult as they miss the presence of their loved one.

Children deal with grief in bits and pieces while they grow. It is not unusual for grief to resurface, or even surface for the first time, years after the death. With each new developmental stage their understanding of life, death and grief will deepen as they mature, bringing new meaning to relationships both present and past.

Major life events such as starting high school, dating, graduation, marriage, or the birth of a first child often see grief resurface, and often with the same intensity as when the death occurred. It is important to remember and help youth understand that this resurfacing of grief can be difficult to share, that it feels like a setback and to reassure them that they're not going crazy – this is a normal and natural experience for many who have lost a loved one.

There are some things they can do, but many youth need help in giving themselves permission to enter the process:

- Encourage them to voice their thoughts and feelings; allow them to grieve in their own way
- Encourage them to accept comfort through family and friends – even when/if they don't understand their grief
- Encourage them to create a space to express their feelings, use mediums like drawing, painting, writing, memory books, journaling, online blogs, hands-on activities like cooking, building, sewing, or physical and outdoor activities
- Encourage and help them to seek support from people who understand what they're experiencing. Sometimes anger, guilt and regret surface, because they, along with other feelings, were delayed. They need to know that these feelings are natural even at a late stage. Connecting with a loss support group, or grief counsellor, can provide added support at times like this.

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