

## **The Grieving Middle School Student**

Middle school students are, under the best conditions, experiencing a great deal of turmoil due to the physical and hormonal changes in their bodies. Grieving students must deal with the additional stress of the grief process. Because of the many physical changes, pre-adolescents tend to have a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances and changes in eating patterns.

They generally experience a range of emotional reactions. In addition, they may be beginning to get their primary support from friends rather than family, as in the past. The normal process of moving away from family towards friends for support is altered when a death impacts them. They want very much to be like their peers and not to be treated differently just because of the death in their family. They often become confused about how and from whom they can get support.

Although preteen students are much more verbal and cognitively process information at a higher level, physical outlets are still very important to the preteen student. They comprehend that death is final and unavoidable. This may provoke feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and may increase risk-taking behaviors. These students are apt to exhibit concerns about the survivors and what their future holds.

### **Common Behaviors to Expect**

- Argumentative
- Withdrawal, sullenness
- Anger, fighting
- Sleepiness
- Lack of concentration and attentiveness
- Risk-taking behaviors (drugs, sexual acting out, stealing)
- Unpredictable ups and downs, or moodiness
- Erratic, inconsistent reactions

### **How to Help**

- Expect and accept mood swings
- Provide a supportive environment where the student can share, when needed
- Anticipate increased physical concerns, including illness and body aches and pains
- Allow the student to choose with whom or how she gets support
- Encourage participation in a support group
- Allow flexibility in completing school work

From *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers*

The Dougy Center The National Center for Grieving Children