

High-Risk Factors for Bereaved Children

In working with children that are bereaved there may be specific indicators that might complicate a child's grief. These stressors could be environmental, developmental, intra or interpersonal. Although some of the factors listed here might be repetitive, they will serve as a reminder of issues to look for which put a grieving child at greater risk:

- Loss of parent before the age of four
- Other significant losses that occur at an age below five or during early adolescence
- Psychological difficulties preceding the death (the more severe the pre-existing pathology, the greater the post-bereavement risk)
- A conflicted relationship with the deceased preceding the death
- Surviving parent who is excessively dependent on the child
- Lack of adequate family or community supports
- Parent who cannot make use of available support system
- Unstable, inconsistent environment including multiple shifts in caretakers and disruption of familiar routines
- Experience of parental remarriage if there is a negative relationship between the child and step-parent
- No prior knowledge about death
- Unanticipated death, suicide, or homicide

Red-Flag Behaviors

What sorts of behavioral indicators might be observed in a child who is having difficulties with grief? The following is a list of some behaviors to be particularly sensitive to:

- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Significant changes from previous behaviors
- Supposed lack of caring (apathy, hopelessness)
- Chronic depression (sleep and/or appetite disturbance, low self-esteem)
- Dropping school grades
- Isolation from family or friends
- Inability to talk at all about the deceased
- Destructive anger or sadistic aggression
- "Accident proneness" (related to guilt)
- Addictive behaviors
- Perfectionism