The information in this handout is provided by Home Nursing Agency. It is our hope it will provide you with some support and comfort during a difficult time.

Information was taken from Companioning the Grieving Child by Dr. Alan Wolfelt and a resource from the Our House Grief Support Center.

Kid-Friendly Key Terms and Definitions

**Addiction** - The urge to do something that is very hard to stop. An invisible disease that causes someone to use more (medicine, drugs, or alcohol) than is safe.

**Overdose** - When you take too much of medicine or drug and your body stops working. The overdose can cause the person to die or possibly cause permanent health problems.

**Prescription Medication** - Substance used for medical treatment, prescribed by a medical doctor.

**Illicit Drug** - Non-medical use of a variety of drugs. These are illegal and can only be bought or received by a drug dealer.

**Death** - When all parts of the body stop working. It doesn’t breathe, see, hear, feel, eat, etc.

**Substance Overdoes and Stigma**

Mr. Fred Rogers once said, “Anything that is human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be manageable”. Nothing is truer than these words; however, losing a loved one to substance overdose and explaining this loss to children can be a very daunting task.

Unfortunately, accidental substance overdoses continue to be on the rise across our area, leaving more families at a loss as to how to tell and assist the children that are grieving their loved one.

Because of the potential stigma and shame associated with drug overdose, family members may not explain the cause of death to the child, leading to potentially further complications of the grieving process. Children who have not been given the truth and later find out the cause of death are many times angry or lose trust in their loved ones. When not given all the information, it is common for children to make up stories in their minds, many times these stories involve blaming themselves in some way for the death.

**Talking about Substance Overdose with Children**

It is important that the caregivers are honest, compassionate and supportive when discuss the death of a loved one from substance overdose.

**Important Tips for Conversation**

- Not all medication is bad. Most of the time when prescribed by a doctor, the medicine will be needed to help an illness or problem with the body. However, some medications can cause addiction, leaving the mind and body to want more and more.

- Discussion at an age-appropriate level and understanding on substance use and the various reasons someone may abuse prescription medications or illicit drugs. Focus on addiction being a disease and although the person may have made poor choices, that does not make them a bad person.

- Coping skills are very important to address. For example, if the substance overdose was due to emotional pain, there is an opportunity to discuss healthy ways to cope with life stressors. Healthy examples include exercise, talking to a friend or parent, art work, journal, etc.
Supporting Children when a Loved One Dies of a Drug Overdose

Common Feelings / Behaviors for Children

Children feel a variety of emotions following the death of someone they love - most commonly confusion, sadness, anger, worry, fear, guilt, embarrassment, and even relief. Children will many times express their grief in very short, brief “doses” and then go back to daily living. Children’s grief may also be seen more in their behaviors. Some common behaviors include crying, regressive behaviors, clingy behaviors, increased time playing alone, physical complaints, not listening, and withdrawing.

Feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and shame are very common following the death of a loved one to substance overdose. Let’s explore each of these a little closer.

Guilt - Guilt following a death is perfectly normal following any death. For children who lost a loved one to substance overdose, this may only heighten, especially when they are not given sufficient information about the death. When children are left with gaps in the how’s and why’s a loved one died, many times they fill these holes with self-blame.

Shame/Embarrassment - Children many times want to blend in with their peers. They don’t want to stick out as “the kid that lost his Dad to drugs”. Due to the stigma associated with substance abuse, children often feel high levels of embarrassment.

Relief - Relief is a common emotion especially after an extended illness before a loved one dies. In families where a loved one has an addiction, chaos, mood swings, unpredictable behaviors, legal issues, financial stress, and many other factors may take a toll on the child and family. The child may have a sense of relief that the family no longer needs to deal with the stressors related to their loved one’s behaviors related to their addiction. The child will feel a wide variety of feelings and each needs to be supported and validated.

Online Resources

grasphelp.org
Grief Recovery After A Substance Passing for parents/caregivers of the grieving child

childrengrieve.org
National Alliance for Grieving Children

tinyurl.com/zk47k5d
New York Life Foundation - free resources for how to support grieving children.

scholastic.com/childrenandgrief/
For educators supporting grieving children

Children's Grief Awareness Day

Children's Grief Awareness Day is observed annually on the third Thursday in November to bring attention to the fact that often support can make all the difference in the life of a grieving child.

Learn more about this national movement at childrensgriefawarenessday.org

Locally, the Healing Patch raises awareness through the “Butterfly Project”. Volunteers create handmade blue butterfly pins that can be purchased at HNA offices throughout November.