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# About the Authors

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Dave is the founder and president of Grief Recovery Inc., in Saginaw, Michigan, a consultant and coauthor of *Confronting Death in the School Family*, *Understanding and Addressing Adolescent Grief Issues* (both published by National Center for Youth Issues) and *Teen Suicide Prevention for Schools and Communities*.

Dave has been in education since 1972. He has also served as an aftercare consultant and grief support group facilitator for a funeral home. He has taught at the elementary, middle, secondary and college levels. Dave is a former At-Risk Coordinator for a K-12 school district and is presently a full-time instructor for Central Michigan University teaching Death and Dying and Suicide Prevention and Adolescent Psychology. He actively participates in professional forums and is highly sought after as a speaker at state and national professional conferences. He has been published several times in professional journals.

During Dave's educational career, he has experienced the death of 28 students and fellow staff members. He was the replacement teacher in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom for a teacher who was killed in a train-automobile accident.

As a grief-response consultant, Dave is widely sought out by schools to help them establish and implement a tragedy component to their crisis response program.

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John is currently co-director of the Safety, Security and Crisis Management Institute, which is a service of Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He also supervises grants and provides consulting and training services at Kent ISD.

This work done  
in dedication  
to my wife,  
Debbie,  
and children  
Jeff, Andy and Jenny.

You are all precious  
gifts from God.

– Dave

# Forward

After the completion of my last book, *Understanding and Addressing Adolescent Grief Issues*, it was my perception that all my major writing projects were complete. I purposely chose not to tackle writing a book on children and grief because unlike *Adolescent Grief Issues*, there is a great wealth of quality information already published. Although I do have a great amount of experience concerning this issue, I did not want to write just another book about an issue I felt, and still feel, is very well addressed by many well-qualified and caring professionals. Also, with the success of *Confronting Death in the School Family*, and *Adolescent Grief Issues* books, I really have no need to tackle this project from a business perspective.

However, literally hundreds of people who have read *Confronting Death* and *Adolescent Grief Issues* have been communicating to me the need for a book on children and grief similar in format. They state that they not only like the format of the other two books, but also like the non-clinical approach, which makes it easy to understand and apply the information provided. Because of these many requests, I organized my thoughts and constructed a non-clinical, informational and practical book for you to better understand, comfort and guide grieving children through the grief process. In the course of this project, I lean on and give credit to the many fine, dedicated people who have worked hard to provide comfort and care to children who are emotionally wounded by events beyond their control.

The following is a result of research, personal experiences, personal mistakes and stories put together to assist adults facing these issues with grieving children. Please be aware, however, that what you have in your heart is far more important than the knowledge that any book can put in your head.

# Introduction

I want to take this opportunity to share with you about my wife, Debbie, and our two sons, Jeff and Andy. My wife is a former widow. We started dating five years after the death of her husband Larry. Jeff, the oldest boy, was 14 months old and Debbie was two months pregnant with Andy at the time Larry died. Although this was an extremely difficult time for Debbie, I wish to focus on how Larry's death affected the two young boys.

According to Debbie, "There is no question that Jeff, at 14 months old, grieved the death of his father. I could tell he missed his dad and was very sad but I couldn't explain the death to him. The day Larry died, a part of Jeff also died. The smile that only his father could bring out in him was gone and has never been seen again. Larry had a favorite red sweater that he wore often. Shortly after his death, Jeff saw a man similar in size of Larry wearing a red sweater. Jeff was sitting in his car seat and began to cry uncontrollably and pointed to the man while trying to break out of his car seat. Jeff certainly did grieve the death of his father, even though he was just over one year old."

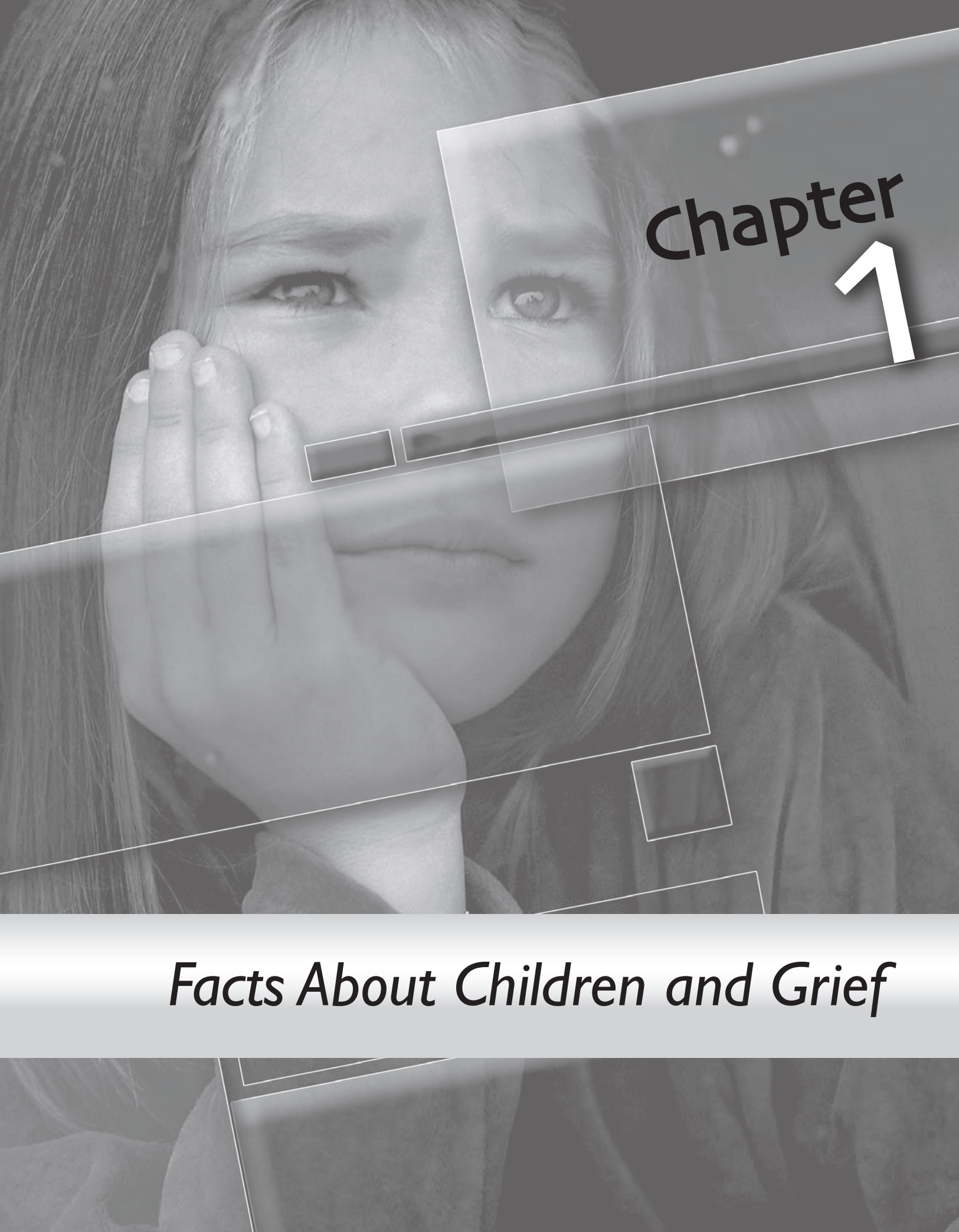
On my second date with Debbie, we took the boys to an ice cream store. While we were eating our ice cream, Andy (then five years old) said to me, "My dad loved Jeff but he didn't love me." Once Debbie and I were over our astonishment, I asked Andy why he felt his dad didn't love him. Andy replied, "because he was alive for Jeff but died before I was born." The forlorn look on Andy's face brought tears to our eyes. This boy, only two months in the womb when his father died, was definitely grieving the death of his father.

Debbie tells another very compelling story supporting the fact that young children do indeed grieve the death of a loved one. "I was shopping at the mall with the two boys. Jeff was five years old and Andy was almost three years old. The boys saw the water fountain at the center of the mall and asked if they could throw a penny into the fountain. I gave them each a penny and told them to make a wish before they threw their penny into the water. They closed their eyes, made their wish and both threw their penny into the water. Then they turned to me and asked if I wanted to know what they wished for. I told them that it was their secret wish. Ignoring my comment, Jeff told me that he wished for a new dad. Andy then said, "me too!" That really brought tears to my eyes and an ache in my heart. From my experience as a widow with two young children, I have no doubt that children, even very young children, grieve the loss of a loved one."

As an aftercare consultant in a funeral home for three years and a grief support group facilitator, I have seen and heard many similar stories demonstrating that young children do indeed grieve. It is also common knowledge that these children are at a higher risk for depression as they grow. When they become adolescents, they are at a much higher risk for suicidal and other risk-taking behaviors. The American Psychiatric Association states that, "The death of a parent before age 8 puts the adolescent at higher risk for suicide attempts." Many experts also claim that most of these children will go through attachment disorder sometime in their lives. Andy went through attachment disorder at a young age while Jeff went through it later in adolescence. Even though I adopted the boys, and have a very loving relationship with them, they still went through attachment disorder even though they've called me dad from the time we announced our engagement.

In summary: a child who experiences the death of a parent, sibling or other close loved one *does indeed* grieve. These grieving children must have the loving guidance of an adult if they are to grow to be emotionally healthy. It is the goal of this book to help you as you comfort, care and guide a child through this difficult process.





# Chapter 1

## *Facts About Children and Grief*

# Chapter One

## *Facts About Children and Grief*

The National Center for Health Statistics in a recent survey states that one in every seven children loses someone close to them by death before the age of ten. This means literally thousands of young children experience the expected or unexpected death of parents, siblings, grandparents or other loved ones. In addition to those who experience the death of a sibling or parent, there are countless friends, classmates and relatives of these children who encounter grief for the first time in their young lives. All too often these children are the “forgotten grievers” and are expected to simply get on with life.

### Special Challenges

Young children generally face more challenges than adults in understanding and grieving a loss. In addition to feeling sad, children may feel shock, anger, confusion, guilt, fright and insecurity. In contrast to adults, children face these challenges without the benefit of life experiences and emotional maturity to deal with these feelings.

### Bouncing In and Out of Grief

In one of my many experiences as an aftercare consultant for a funeral home caring for families of the deceased, a young child (about 5 years old) came to the visitation for his deceased grandfather. After he had a healthy cry, he went to the other end of the emotional spectrum. He was told that he and his family were going to McDonald's® for dinner, before the evening visiting hour at the funeral home. The young boy was elated that he was going to get a “Happy Meal” at McDonald's® and he was not shy about telling visitors where he was going for dinner. This is very normal behavior for a young child. Children usually bounce in and out of grief, crying one moment and laughing the next. This young boy had another healthy cry just before leaving the funeral home to go to McDonald's®. This is very confusing for children because they don't understand why they bounce in and out of grief so



**In addition to feeling sad, children may feel shock, anger, confusion, guilt, fright and insecurity.**



quickly. It is also confusing for most adults in trying to understand the child's emotional reactions and, therefore, the needs of the grieving child.

## Behavior

Adults, because of their established vocabulary, can usually connect words with feelings. Children may be too young to connect words with feelings. Thus, the way children can best express themselves is through their behavior. One example is they may become aggressive or hurt themselves as a way of relieving pain they can't express. Others, as a result of fear, may become withdrawn, unwilling to share thoughts and feelings, harboring their fears inside.

## Play

In 1988, I was a Physical Education teacher in an elementary school. A close friend of mine for 16 years was one of the 5th grade teachers. My friend was killed in a car accident on a Friday evening in February. I was the replacement teacher in his classroom the following Monday morning. This was an experience in life you would never want to sign up for. However, after going through this difficulty, I learned a great deal about helping grieving children I would not have learned by doing research. The children taught me more than I could have ever imagined. While in this circumstance, my approach toward the children was to express how I was feeling about the tragedy to legitimize their feelings. As a result, the children saw me as more than their teacher—they saw me as a human being also mourning this loss along with them. They also taught me that *grief shared is grief diminished*. In sharing our grief, we encouraged each other. However, this may not always be the best approach. The children may need someone to provide a high degree of stability at this time. Sharing how you are impacted by the tragedy may hinder efforts to provide stability. The adult in charge must make this decision.

That particular Monday morning, the playground supervisors were very upset when they discovered a group of first grade students in our school were acting out during play how they perceived this tragedy had occurred. Experts agree that this is normal and healthy behavior if the children choose to do this on their own, without any prompting from adults. This type of play usually includes their feelings and understanding of the tragedy. In instances where there is a high degree of volatility or hysteria, I highly recommend that if children indicate that they do want to act out what happened, they do so under the supervision of a professional.

Behavior and play become one of the few outlets children have when they lack life experiences in the understanding of a tragedy and how it fits into everyday life. Remember, as stated before, they usually do not have a vocabulary to connect words and feelings. With this in mind, children need physical comfort, sympathy, compassion and an opportunity to express themselves in their own way far more than they need advice. I will expand more on this idea in the upcoming chapters.



## Age Considerations

Before I discuss specific age considerations of the child, I wish to express the fact that grief is a unique experience to all individuals, including children. I do not believe in the theory that grieving children of a certain age group grieve in a certain way. I believe that each child will, in some phase of the grief journey, respond in an atypical and unique manner. However, there are times when a peer group's influence will impact children, causing their behaviors to fall into typical patterns. Although we do find some general typical grief responses relative to age, caring adults must afford the opportunity to the grieving child to teach us what grief is like for him.

## Common Grief Responses and Patterns

Please bear in mind that while I am attempting to list typical patterns, the uniqueness with which people experience grief may not show up on my lists.

*Baby to Age Two* – Increased crying, thumb sucking, fussier, sleep more or less, eat more or less.

*Preschoolers - ages 3 to 6* – May be frightened and may not understand their feelings. They usually cannot verbalize what is going on inside them. They may ask some questions about the death over and over again. They also may act out the death through play. Regression to thumb sucking, losing potty training and baby talk are common. They usually don't understand the permanence of death.

*Ages 6 to 9* – Many experts state that children in this age group primarily express their grief through play. Many may appear to misbehave or act in such a way that adults perceive their actions as misbehavior. This may occur because of children's confusion over how to handle their grief feelings and, in many cases, their actions may not really constitute misbehavior at all. Their questions may revolve around curiosity about the decomposition of the body and the biological process of death. They also may believe the person may be alive in the grave. The permanence of death is still very difficult to comprehend.

*Ages 9 to 12* – At this age children are developing a better understanding of death. They are usually ready for more information or answers to these questions:

- Why did the death happen?
- What is and what happens at a funeral?
- What is the reason for a funeral?
- Will others they love die?
- What will happen to them if a parent or both parents die?

As caring adults, our role is to help children grieve. We need to support and educate them, not protect them from grief. We must realize that grief is the solution, not the problem. Unfortunately, the child must be allowed to feel his pain if he is going to heal. Rather than advice, the greater needs of the child are physical comfort, sympathy and compassion.

