

## Grief of children can't be dismissed

*By Diane Majeske  
News-Leader*

No one wants to see a child unhappy.

But grief is a natural emotion, and acknowledging and allowing a child to experience it is vital, say bereavement specialists.

“Children are especially hard hit by death — especially by the death of a parent — because of their dependency,” says Tobias Meeker, director of the ethics program at St. John’s Regional Health Center. “And what so often happens is the adults — thinking they’re protecting the child — will exclude them from being involved.

“Children are left with this crushing sorrow and the adults — with good intentions — won’t address it.”

And children grieve in stages, says Karen Scott, Lost & Found director. That may further perplex adults.

“A 3-year-old whose father died only has a limited of understanding of it,” she says, “but when he’s 7 or 8, and has a better understanding of death, he grieves again. And when he’s 14 and feels like he really needs a dad, he’ll grieve again.”

And because younger children tend to grieve in shorter increments of time, adults may mistakenly believe the child’s grief issues have been resolved.

“Children grieve in short increments of time because that’s how they do everything,” she says. “A child may be sad for a few minutes, then go out and play. Then he’ll come back with some questions and then play. That’s how they deal with death; that’s how they deal with anything.

“So parents may see them out playing — and that’s OK if they’re out playing — but it doesn’t mean they’re not grieving.”

That’s important, because the issues won’t simply go away with time.

At The Dougy Center, the organization on which Lost & Found is modeled, adults have spoken to associate director Joan Schweizer Hoff about the childhood grief they never worked through.

“The rest of their lives is complicated,” she says. “They can’t forget, and they’re living with all this grief they can’t share. Some turn to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain; some become workaholics. Some turn to criminal behavior, or develop neuroses.

“You deal with grief, even if you never deal with it directly.”