How to Tell If A Grieving Child Needs Extra Help
From: Healing the Bereaved Child (1996) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Many of the behaviors listed below are normal grief responses (with the exception of those that might harm the child or others). What makes these "red flags" is a matter of degree. Panic and fear, for example, are normal. Persistent panic and fear, on the other hand, are symptomatic of unmet mourning needs. Mourning behaviors should soften in intensity and duration over time if the child is making progress in his or her grief journey.

Signs of Complicated Mourning in Children:

- Total denial of the reality of the death
- Persistent panic, fear
- Prolonged physical complaints without organic findings
- Prolonged feelings of guilt or responsibility for the death when the child obviously isn't responsible. (Children who feel guilt because they are responsible for the death often benefit from individual counseling as well.)
- *Chronic* patterns of apathy and/or depression
- *Chronic* hostility, acting-out toward others or self
- Prolonged change in typical behavior patterns or personality (e.g., the amiable child who now gets in fights all the time or the normally outgoing child who becomes introverted and withdrawn).
- Consistent withdrawal from friends and family members
- Dramatic, ongoing changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Suicidal thoughts or actions
Normal Grief or Clinical Depression?
From: Healing the Bereaved Child (1996) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Signs of Clinical Depression in Children:

- In normal grief, children respond to comfort and support; clinically depressed children often reject support.

- The bereaved child is often able to use play to work out feelings of grief; the depressed child is more often resistant to the use of play.

- The bereaved child is often openly angry; the depressed child may complain and be irritable, but may not directly express anger.

- Bereaved children will usually connect depressed feelings to the death; depressed children often do not relate their feelings to any life event.

- In normal grief, bereaved children can still experience moments of enjoyment in life; depressed children often project a pervasive sense of doom.

- Caring adults around the bereaved child can sense feelings of sadness and emptiness; the depressed child often projects a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness.

- While the bereaved child is more likely to have transient physical complaints, the depressed child may have chronic physical complaints.

- Bereaved children may express guilt over some aspect of the loss; depressed children often have generalized feelings of guilt.

- While the self-esteem of bereaved children is temporarily impacted, it is usually not the deep loss of esteem typically seen in clinically depressed children.